

OBITUARY: JOHN LATHAM

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One of John Latham's admirers, Damien Hirst, said, 'He proves it is possible to be an enfant terrible for ever.' So Latham remained, still at his death, at the age of 84, in dispute with the Tate over their current exhibition of his art.

Yet at the private view of 'John Latham in Focus' at Tate Britain in September, the Tate's director, Sir Nicholas Serota, paid him an informal tribute: 'Think of all the work around the world that's derivative of John on which so much praise has been lavished,' he said, 'and yet none of it comes close to his vision.'

He has been compared with William Blake as a visionary but Latham saw his work as making connections between art practice and science theory, using the former to expand the latter. He saw books as signifiers of the dissemination of knowledge but also of deceit, and as representative of a different time-scale in metaphysical terms.

The argument was over the withdrawal from the exhibition, without his sanction or that of the curator, of a key 1991 work, *God is Great*, for fear it would bring violent reprisals from Muslim fundamentalists " the piece is a six-foot-high sheet of plate glass with torn copies of the Bible, the Talmud and the Koran stuck in it. Latham argued that it was an apolitical observation:

Each of these books is in the format of linear time, but they are not complete, each of them is as incomplete as the others, and I thought that that was fair comment. What I want to say is that this is how history looks to me, and in a piece like *God is Great* I'm saying this is what happens, whether I like it or not.

He found the Tate's concerns about public safety incomprehensible: 'To say we can't have this in here when they know it's right in the middle of the art track is a failure of common sense,' he said. 'It's an interrupted discourse, and therefore it's a form of assault for purposes which are nothing to do with the art.' The issue was the subject of a debate at the Tate in November which concluded overwhelmingly that the piece should not have been withdrawn.

John Latham was born in 1921 in Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia, the son of the District Commissioner, Geoffrey Latham, a devout Christian, and sent as a boarder to Winchester College. He served in the Royal Navy in the Second World War, witnessing from the battleship *King*

George V the sinking of the Hood on 24 May 1941 and the sinking three days later of the Bismarck. Injured, he was transferred to motor torpedo boats, serving under Peter Scott and ending the war as a lieutenant-commander, with his own MTB. Then, in 1946, he went to Regent Street Polytechnic, and, after a year there, studied painting at Chelsea College of Art and Design until 1950.

In the early Fifties he became more concerned with processes than the production of art, and with recording sequences of events and patterns of knowledge in different dimensions. Books became a recurrent theme, both as compositional elements for their metaphorical potential but also as a signifier of knowledge and information. His south London house has two giant books, their pages intertwined, emerging from the faade.

He had his first solo exhibition at the Obelisk Gallery in London in 1955. In 1958 he produced the first of his book pieces with Burial of Count Orgaz, a transcription of El Greco's paintings using overpainted and burnt books of prose along with other objects like a whisky bottle and a fireguard whose forms remain the same but whose appearances are changed simply by spraying them black.

In the Sixties he created a series of what he called 'Skoob Towers', piles of venerable volumes like the Encyclopaedia Britannica which he set on fire in a parody of how knowledge systems work. A film of the event was a centrepiece of last year's 'Art of the Sixties' Tate Britain exhibition. 'Those things were never intended to be provocative, any more than God is Great is,' he said.

Latham taught fine art at St Martin's School of Art and developed a popularity among students for his disregard for the artistic establishment. Offended by the compartmentalising of artists " 'We don't have movements, we have individuals who happen to be doing something different to all the rest,' he said " he borrowed from the college library a copy of Clement Greenberg's 1961 Art and Culture which expounded the theories of modernism, which Latham found tendentious. He and his students carefully dismembered the book, literally, and assiduously chewed every page, with Latham arranging the regurgitated remains in an elegant travelling case, which is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Latham was duly dismissed, but only when he failed to return the book to the library.

He continued to experiment, through performance art, paintings, assemblages, films and videos, and conceived his Event-Structures representing a complex realigning of social, economic, political and aesthetic structures around a 'time-base' in which the artist, far from being outside the art in the conventional way, plays a critical part. It was

a time of performance art by Destructionists such as Gustav Metzger, a lifelong friend, and the young conceptualist Yoko Ono.

In 1951 he had married the artist Barbara Steveni, and with her in 1966 he created the Artist Placement Group, a sociological and aesthetic programme for placing artists in positions within industry, science and government where they could generate alternatives to what they saw as divisive systems of power. The couple were working on an updated version, Organisation and Imagination, when he died.

But he was most concerned latterly with scientists who, he said, believed in two levels of time, one cosmological and the other linear. He believed, and said he had proved through art, that there was at least one more, which he called Flat Time. 'I'm saying all time is event-based, like a spray of paint " each spot can be seen as a happening issuing from a single event, the pressing of the spray trigger,' he said. 'Physicists can't visualise it, and they've got into an awful tangle.' So seriously did the scientists take him, however, that he was made an honorary fellow of the Imperial College of Science and Technology.

Before Christmas John Latham and his wife visited the newly reopened De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill. He caught a chill and failed to overcome it.

John Aubrey Clarendon Latham, artist: born Livingstone, Northern Rhodesia 23 February 1921; married 1951 Barbara Steveni (two sons, one daughter); died London 1 January 2006.

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