



Arts Lab London 17 March 1970 John Hopkins reporting

I came to the conclusion recently that the Arts Lab is a state of mind. It is by no means certain that everyone else here agrees with this statement. Fortunately, we can agree to disagree over a wide range of things. This article is a description of the state of mind as I experience it.

How we got here

Late in 1968 it was evident that the Drury Lane Arts Lab didn't have enough space to fit the intentions of all the people working there, and a group split off, 'led' as the straight press saw it, by Dave Curtis. Thanks to the friendly interest of Christine Stewart Munro, a Camden Councillor, and a quantity of patience unusual in our circles, the Camden Borough Council eventually laid on us a 4 storey deserted factory just north of the Euston Road. There are many other details and acknowledgements which I leave out for brevity's sake. The point is, Camden Council gave us this factory because we are a group of artists, and in its own way, Camden digs artists.

We got the factory last midsummer, and by this time the group had grown to about 25 and acquired several trustees, or trustys as I think of them. You can read their names on the letterhead, they're helpful people. So we started with no bread, an empty factory and some energy. Have you ever been faced with this situation? It's scary, to say the least. Looking back, it took us about six months to be able to start relating to each other in a way that accommodates our disagreements, as well as our agreements. During this time we each took a piece of the space available and started to turn it into a workable environment. Or, if you like, each of us made a piece of the territory our own by building walls to keep the heat in, electricity installing, heating, telephones and so on. It isn't finished, of course. There aren't enough phones, there is no internal intercom, and when it's cold it freezes. Never mind, summer's coming.

Consciousness Coming

For the last month or so, it's been feeling different. We're starting to realise a collective consciousness. You have to understand that it's not a uniform consciousness, we don't all think or behave or live the same. But we are all beginning to share experiences with each other, and what our common consciousness is is simply that. It seems to be developing at our own speed. Seen from the inside, it's a sort of family. Instead of the usual sort of family, which lives (I mean cats sleeps is at home) together, we are a family that works, thinks and has activity together. Most of us live nearby and one of us, George, has a pad in the factory itself. He is lucky in that he doesn't need much privacy, because he doesn't get much. But it's a family none the less, and what we are doing, on an interpersonal level, is learning how to spend time together. Funny, in a way, that it's something to be learned. Or, what is to be unlearned is the fear that we all have of each other. Or, we are all changing, at our own speeds.

Inside Out

Seen from the outside, we present a rather different picture. The Institute for Research in Art and Technology has about 25 directors and about 16 departments. Some of these are concerned with public performances and others are workshop facilities, rehearsal rooms and the like. Those are the trees. This is the wood: an accelerating flow of people bringing with them energy, money, ideas, needs, hangups, talents. We don't know yet how many people can interact in the course of a week using the building as a coordinate point, but it's certainly a lot more than do at present. We are still trying to understand what is happening on the levels of interaction with other people, and one of the difficulties is that the boundary of the central family is undefined. It's also one of the advantages: you see, we're really a lot more undefined than most people think.

Interaction: a guess

There's the central family. At one point in time the number of these people in the building might be fifteen. The other twenty aren't there (yes, it grows every week). That's one level. In a couple of workrooms, say darkroom and video, there might be another dozen people using the facilities. If you came in to these places you wouldn't be able to tell for quite a while who was central and who was using the facilities: and in any case the developing pattern is that of cooperatives forming around each facility, the central person or people being coordinators. So co-op members is another level. Thirdly, there might be people who have come for a specific event. On average they're more consumers than activators. You are what you eat, says a voice in my head. And there might be ten or a hundred more depending on the event and the publicity. Call these people audiences.

That could be the situation on a Saturday evening. There would no doubt be several people in the family room at the top of the building talking or just being quiet. Maybe coordinating publicity information. Maybe not. The interesting thing is that if the same hundred and fifty people happened to be in the building next week, the chances are that some who were audience would now be family or coop, some who were coop would now be audience or family, and so on.

Like a Hologram

So, in a way, the lack of definiton at the Arts Lab is part of its very nature. If you want to find out what it's all about, you've got to spend some time here. The longer you spend, the more you find out but a small piece will tell you a lot, just like a hologram. At some point, you realise that you've been inventing it all along, and you need to relax all those definitions and rules and take a fresh look. Depending on how easy you find it to let go a previous point of view, you'll move into present time with us and we with you.

You may find out, as I did, that what you see is what you are. If you see a bunch of pseudo freaks, or bourgeois intellectuals, or revolutionaries, or hippies, or artists, or technicians, it is because you have that description ready to apply

and it seems to fit. OK, I don't mind. Everyone gets to read their own message here, as well as other peoples.

Activities, facilities, people, information

People mentioned can be contacted on 387 2605 in the afternoons and evenings, except on Mondays when we're closed all day, and if a different phone number is given here try that first.

Cinema: Evening showings all six days. Tuesdays open screening for film makers, Wednesdays New Cinema Club, Thursdays Film Makers Coop shows, weekends as programmed. Fred Drummond who has been running the cinema under a great deal of stress will soon be helped out by Dave Curtis 836 0361 and is interested in expanded cinema: using film as the basis of an event held in a cinema. The cinema holds 100 people and can project 16mm and 8mm movies. Graeme and Al help with projection.

Filmmakers Coop: Carla Liss 387 6573 in the afternoons keeps the place going by running the distribution office. There is a large and growing catalogue of films for hire.

Film Processing facilities: Thanks to Victor Herbert donating equipment and the energy of people coordinated by Malcolm LeGrice 427 5914, black and white film can now be processed and they're investigating colour. This means that at last the bottom is knocked out of the film processing/censoring price fixing racket. The printer has some optical effects, and I expect this machine to leave its mark, literally, on a whole new generation of movies.

Photography: Ian Robertson and Graham Peet have set up a dark room which is used in 3 four hour shifts seven days a week at low cost, by photographers wanting facilities. You can book it in advance and have to bring your own materials. The Arts Council has provisionally granted £150 to this coop.

Screen Printing: Ian Robertson and Judith Clute GUL 9120 have set up a screen printing workshop where posters have been made for about three months. Still in need of drying racks, it can be used by people who bring their own materials.

Printing: John Collins intends to set up a litho press soon. Meanwhile a faithful duplicator or two turns out most of our information. Which accounts for the fact that it's pretty boring to look at but interesting to read. And it's cheap.

Gallery: Pamela Zoline GUL 9120, with Biddy Peppin, Liz Evans and Godfrey Rubens 387 6639, arrange shows in the gallery. Next exhibition is J. G. Ballards Crashed Cars starting April 3rd. As the weather gets warmer there'll be more use of the gallery space for eating and drinking (but not alcohol - the local pub takes care of that) and poetry readings, lightshows and so on. It's likely that as the people acceleration continues, the reception area and the gallery will merge into a warm and comfortable environment. The next couple of months should see to that.

In Reception: Mary Giblin 240 1983/SWI 4190 coordinates the sleek eyed beauties and sexy young men who welcome you if you welcome them on arrival. You have to be a member to come in anyway, so you're bound to meet these people first. By the way, becoming a member - which you can do for one night if you want - keeps us legal and pays some of the cost of lighting heating receptionists' wages telephone bills and garbage disposal. It's everybody's initial contribution to keep the place going. The first floor is devoted to THEATRE, now run by Martin Russell with help from Diane Lifton 727 3299. There's also a rehearsal room that you can book. Martin reckons that the rehearsal charge, which is a lot less than West End rehearsal rooms, helps to cover the rather high overheads you get in keeping a theatre space going. Heading for a mid year festival of experimental theatre, the theatre floor houses from time to time such diverse events as the Asian Music Circle, a coffee bar, the recent open space environments full of amazing machines, and video demonstrations. MUSIC is coordinated by Hugh Davies 722 6248, and pop music by Martin Russell, Hoppy, Diane Lifton and anyone else interested. George keeps his tools somewhere there too (the theatre I mean). Before I forget, Food: George and Julian intermittently and macrobiotic, and Books: David Moir 387 3877 are also on the ground floor in reception. Plastics: workshop: Bernard Rhodes 485 8113 showed me the other day some orange squashy hemispheres that I couldn't resist sitting all over. Some surprises here when the vacuum forming is together.

Electronics workshop, John Lifton 727 3299 which also houses our computer terminal, courtesy Time Sharing Limited. Lifton's own interest has been cybernetic reactive sculpture (what?) which among other things converts light to sound using TV camera, computers and his own circuitry. People use the facilities here by arrangement. Recent thefts have meant that we need to keep this area carefully shut to random outsiders. I wonder why we steal from each other. Perhaps it's because the person who steals doesn't feel one of us, and we aren't yet sensitive enough to feel it before it happens. TVX, the video workshop, coordinated by me, Hoppy 387 8080. Yes we're blossoming. Sony lent us some equipment and I'm breaking my ass looking for a way to buy some. Everything augurs well for a prosperous summer if we can only rip off some more hardware. Working with me are Jo Pattiniott and Olivier Rickmers, and about fifteen other people who now form the nucleus of the rapidly expanding Video Coop. Administration by Biddy Peppin 836 0361 who has a natural talent for getting things straight, she'd probably be good at flower arrangement too. And me again, helping with publicity coordination for the time being. Lance Blackstone (accounts), David Kilburn (ad man) and Joebear Webb (law) appear now and again to help.

What?

That tells a piece of it. A bite out of the hologram. If you ring 387 8080 you'll get an answering machine telling the day's events. If you want to get involved, come on over to 1, Robert Street, N.W.1, there's always something to do but we do close Mondays. Or come and empty your head. It's a question of process. The idea is to leave the place feeling better than you did when you arrived. Give someone a beautiful experience today.