

**Published as** “The Artists Placement Group: Context is (not) Everything,” **Artists Reclaim the Commons: New Works, New Territories, New Publics**, ed. by Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer, 144-150 ISC Press, 2013

### **Context is (not) Everything**

Almost every account of the Artists Placement Group begins with an evocative portrayal of its co-founder, the artist Barbara Steveni, sorting through piles of rubbish outside a London factory to collect materials for a Fluxus installation. Peering into the factory window, Steveni experienced an ah-ha moment, realizing that engaging with the workers inside might be a more authentically Fluxus activity, creating a direct rapprochement between art and life. Since then much has been made of the timing of Steveni’s insight--the mid 60s, with the developed world on the cusp of an economic transformation from manufacturing to service industries—which lead her to develop the Artists Placement Group (APG) and through them propose that artists could play a unique role in this changing workplace.

Just as its name implies the goal of the Artists Placement Group (APG) was to ‘place’ artists in non-art venues, giving them the opportunity to engage with circumstances beyond both studio and gallery. The earliest placements, which were in factories and other businesses, took place in the 60s; possibilities expanded in the 70s to include health care facilities, especially mental health, the commercial shipping industry and government offices. Steveni, whose work at the time was identified mostly in relation to the Fluxus movement, joined forces with her husband, conceptualist John Latham, to develop these placements. ‘Incidental Person’, was the term Latham coined for artists in placement sites to indicate that they were free agents, able to make constructive contributions in real world situations. By virtue of their creative intelligence as well as their freedom from the conventions inherent to a particular workplace (e.g. bureaucratic routine, commercial self-interest) they would be able to imagine other possibilities.

While APG remained active into the '90s (after '89 under the name Organization + Imagination) their work largely fell from sight during the '80s and remained so until recently. Despite the fact that they represent one of the most groundbreaking and radical of '60s conceptual based practices, their rediscovery, which began about ten years ago, has been gradual as well as controversial, in some ways paralleling both the growth of and resistance to the social practice art movement for which they serve as both precursor and model. This essay explores some of the causes and explanations for their disappearance from contemporary art discourse as well as for the mixed responses to their re-entry.

When an APG artist began work at a placement location, their initial contact, identified by Latham and Steveni as the 'open brief', was in fact just that, allowing them a short time (a month or less) on site, to observe, listen and gather data about the particular set of circumstances that existed at a given workplace or organization. Artists would then use this information to create the next phase of the project, a 'feasibility study'. The first declaration of the APG manifesto, 'Context is half the work', was used as slogan and framework throughout. Seeming to offer a playful challenge to received wisdom (context is everything) its actual register lay somewhere between caution and provocation.

How did APG's artists interpret this twist on the importance of context within their own, the '60s and '70s? What guidance did it offer? Discussions of context inevitably lead back to Duchamp: once he made evident that the exhibition venue is the context that produces the art and also bestows its value, artists began to explore alternative sites as well as sources of content and form that had been considered off limits. There were a few other commonly held and retroactively agreed upon influences among conceptual artists of the '60s, the earliest and most radical of which was the Situationist International, a European based group of writers, artists and theorists who advocated for an economic and political alternative to capitalism.

Members of two collectives that developed in the early 50s, the Lettrists International and the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, (originally members of the COBRA group) formed the Situationist International, for whom, after a contested period, filmmaker and theorist Guy Debord emerged as its leader in 1957. Developing a psychological perspective about urban space called psychogeography, defined by Debord as “the laws and effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals”<sup>1</sup> the Situationists experimented with the construction of ‘situations’ or ‘the derive’ (drift). Meant to lead pedestrians away from their usual route and defamiliarize the city, a derive was designed to provoke critical analysis of the urban experience. By the mid 60s however, Situationist theory became increasingly radical with many members either abandoning or being expelled from the group while those remaining engaged primarily in activist work. Many consider them an important driving force behind May 1968 revolts in Paris.

Fluxus was an equally influential movement, also establishing its own social and political positions, rejecting cultural and aesthetic norms and by-passing the museum and gallery system to bring life and art closer together. In 1957, artists who were soon to be participants in a then nascent Fluxus movement met each other while taking classes in experimental music with John Cage at the New School for Social Research. However it was not until 1962 that erstwhile Fluxus founder George Maciunas attached the name to the movement. Ephemeral and often humorous, a typical Fluxus event blended different artistic genres (visual, literary and musical), sharing the techniques traditionally particular to each. Another prominent Fluxus member, George Brecht, considered the concept of event in relation to new developments in quantum physics. “For Brecht, the aim was to create works that opened up a sense of a duration within which every sound, every breath, every movement became a part of the work; subjectivity therefore becomes the context of the art event and the event becomes a means for exploring or producing subjectivities.”<sup>2</sup>

Finally, although best known for his Happenings ('events' which predate and also overlap Fluxus in almost every way—participants, elements, structure, intentions, forms, limits (or lack thereof), Allan Kaprow should be included in this list of influences for his entire body of work that also included writing and pedagogy. Not only did he impact APG and their contemporaries, he has and probably will continue to inspire many generations of students to become, in his term, 'un-artists.'

In addition to the aforementioned APG protocols -- the open brief, an alternative context and the feasibility study—there is another important component, the 'event structure', a method Latham devised for measuring the effect of ideas and actions. Although Latham has received criticism for his complex and some say impenetrable explanation of the event structure it becomes much clearer when discussed in relation to both the Situationist 'derive' and the Fluxus 'event'. The basic unit of measure in Latham's system is the 'least-event', connected, like Brecht's 'event' to the relationship between energy and matter in quantum physics, but in this case serving as point zero, a beginning from which things move forward. According to Latham, industry and government measure time and productivity short-sightedly. Implicitly challenging the early 20<sup>th</sup> century time and motion studies of Taylor and Galbraith, (Taylorism/Fordism), by which humans were measured based on their short term economic productivity, Latham wanted to employ a much longer time frame, thus fundamentally changing the standards used to determine value. Like Debord and Brecht, APG artists would present opportunities for participants to consider their subjective experiences of the workplace and engage in derive-like defamiliarizations to encourage critique and reevaluation of everyday surroundings and daily procedures. Since Latham believed artists already perceive and use time differently, he considered them ideally suited to lead others in an exploration of new situations and social relations in the workplace. While Latham's ideas may seem idealistic and overblown, it helps to recall that this was a time before artists became the small business entrepreneurs they are today. There was still a strong belief that art could be a means to change the world.

As graduates of any MBA program know, feasibility studies are used to uncover the strengths and weaknesses of a proposed venture in order to determine its potential for success. However APG's use of this mundane sounding exercise turned the tables on business analysis by directly addressing the practical concerns of the artist. The question was not how successful the artist's project would be but rather how cooperative the host would be in carrying out the proposal as written. Although APG may seem exaggerated in its claims about art and artists they were very serious about creating new roles for them in non-art contexts that they believed could offer opportunities to confront the status quo.

It is not surprising that during the '60s other fields were reconsidering 'the everyday' as an important area of investigation and interpretation, particularly the social sciences. Alfred Schutz, an Austrian philosopher and sociologist who worked across disciplines, combined sociology and phenomenology, to develop an influential mode of inquiry that sought to explicate the everyday aspects of human experience. To better understand a context at the subjective level, phenomenological sociologists look beneath obvious interpretations of behavior and actions to observe the way meaning is built among what were called 'consociates' or people who share a community of space over time.<sup>3</sup> Another sociologist, Harold Garfinkle, influenced by Schutz, developed this research further and defined a new area of inquiry, Ethnomethodology, which focuses on understanding social order, how it arises and is maintained.

Although there is no evidence that either of these areas influenced APG directly, the fact that similar experiments existed in two very different fields simultaneously could lend authority to both. And while there were vast differences in method and intention between the two fields one could easily compare the results of such social science research to an APG feasibility study. Conceptual artist Stuart Brisley's study for Peterlee, a new town in Dunham County in Northeast England is exemplary in this regard. Built in 1950 to improve living conditions for the inhabitants of overcrowded mining villages, Peterlee, like many 'new towns' constructed after

WW2, was erected quickly with generic design and shoddy construction. By 1976, when Brisley's project was undertaken, its current inhabitants had been permitted such negligible contribution to the town's planning and administration that many still felt alienated, even after living there for more than 25 years. Realizing that the community needed to become more aware of the social and economic history of the area to better comprehend their current circumstances, Brisley laid out a plan titled 'History Within Living Memory'. For part one, which involved collecting historical materials, Brisley employed six local people to gather all available photographs and make and transcribe tape recordings to document the events and changes between 1900 and the 1970s, the period during which the villages original to the area where Peterlee was built were transformed from rural farming communities to industrial mining sites. Brisley's sensitivity to the British exigencies of class and social hierarchy were clearly shown in his introduction when he implicitly countered any idealization of the past that might occur as a result of the project:

(T)he form and character of the physical and social environment of the pit villages resulted largely from the outcome of the development of interests concerned with the creation and acquisition of excess wealth. In the process of the realization of excess wealth, mines were sunk, wage labor was bought (pit sinkers, miners) and housing built. The miner sold his labor power to temporarily alleviate the basic needs... This...produced to a large extent the shape and character of the environment.

While interviews with some of the communities' elders recount an ethos of support and solidarity among the miners and their families, Lewis Bunt, grandson of Thomas Bunt, the first local miner elected to Parliament, quoted his grandfather's description of the degraded quality of the miners' houses as "reflecting what coal owners thought of miners." <sup>4</sup>



Peterlee before (above)

And after (below)



Although sites of UK's pre WW2 mining towns, notorious for their blighted working and living conditions, might seem obvious choices for possible placement locations, Barbara Steveni's social and political antennae were finely tuned. Keeping abreast of regional controversies, debates and sources of discontent, she carefully sought out communities with the potential to benefit from a placement while also considering which artists would make significant and meaningful contributions. Thanks to Steveni APGs' placements were never random, nor was their approach ever one size fits all.

In accounting for APG's virtual disappearance in the 80s one major factor was their

lack of a comprehensive publication. Although many magazine articles appeared during their active years, most of their projects were developed for small, non art audiences and documentation was rarely exhibited within an art context, making it difficult even for their strongest art world supporters to keep track of their work. When such a book is finally compiled, the letters of inquiry sent by Steveni to potential placement locations will be among its most outstanding and useful revelations. Meanwhile, although negative press began to undermine APG as early as 1971 following an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, they continued to receive support from the Arts Council of Great Britain although in declining amounts for several more years. Ironically this was the period during which they completed some of their most successful projects. Among these was Ian Breakwell's work with the UK Department of Health and Social Security, which facilitated his placement at two notorious high security psychiatric hospitals, Broadmoor and Rampton. His feasibility study report, co-written with a group of architects, which advocated a total restructuring of each institution's practices at all levels, had a positive impact on conditions in both hospitals.



Broadmoor Hospital, 1962



In fact some of APG's work was deemed so effective that a private UK foundation joined forces with the Arts Council to create their own iteration of artists placements. APG spent years challenging the legality of the Arts Council's actions and eventually sued them, but to no avail—it turned out the court had no power over another official UK agency. In addition, the Arts Council was able to suppress information about APG's work, saying that they had lost materials or never received correspondence and even that certain projects had never existed at all. Although APG kept their own records and documentation, at that time and for a number of subsequent years it became very difficult to challenge the authority of their national arts funding organization. And for the most part the Arts Council placements followed what is now a conventional artists-in-residence model rather than APG's carefully developed protocols. <sup>5</sup>

While some of APG's processes seemed similar to those used in the social sciences their overall relationship to the area has been misunderstood. That APG was "more concerned with social engineering than 'straight' art" is one of the oft-quoted critiques leveled against them by the Arts Council early on. From the perspective of political science, social engineering connotes an effort to influence popular attitudes on a broad scale, usually to produce conformity to particular behaviors. In fact APG's aim was to encourage people at their placement sites to question received information and popular beliefs in ways that might encourage them to act more independently. More recently, in his essay "Context is Half the Work" (*Frieze* Nov.-Dec. 2007) New Museum curator Peter Eleely noted APG's early interest in the new 'systems' of social science and recognized their prescience in forecasting the growth of the service-industry and the increasing value of intellectual property. Although better able, with 20/20 hindsight, to re-evaluate certain aspects of APG's contribution, Eleely seems to interpret their placements as experiments in behaviorism rather than allowing that they might actually function as the art/life mediations they were intended to be.

Mostly APG's critics place them among differently problematic but not necessarily opposing positions. From one perspective they are chastised for modeling the instrumentalization of artists (working to serve an idea or agenda) and for creating a prototype of today's precarious worker (part-time and project based employment). Some of their critics go further, indicting them for modeling the so-called corporate takeover of 'creativity' on the one hand while reproaching them for indiscriminately idealizing the 'creativity' of artists, on the other.

Exploiting artists or other workers was never part of APG's plan. Another artist-institutional relationship that APG's philosophy and methodology both anticipated and calls into question is the area of artists' 'services', first identified by Andrea Fraser in the '90s. In her book *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* she noted that these 'services' include a broad range of practices which had evolved from the '60s and early '70s, and goes on to classify such projects within an expanded set of terms that include community-based art, public art, context art, project art and cultural production. Calling attention to the proliferation of such 'services', Fraser's aim is to explore some of the functions they perform in and for institutions. Making clear that these projects are not similar thematically nor were the artists part of a new movement, Fraser proposed that the call for these initiatives was driven by extra-aesthetic needs—often those of publicly subsidized institutions in their attempt to satisfy 'educational' or 'community' activities required by their funders. The primary issue here is the old saw of artistic autonomy but with a twist. Fraser believed that artists were giving up their freedom not by performing services with and for others but by doing them within the museum itself. When such projects were brought into the institution to be managed and then presented as 'art' their social component was instrumentalized and thus neutralized by the art institution while their identity as artistic production became forced and over determined.

In terms of precarious part time workers, a subject that has been much discussed, Latham's critique of the Taylorist/Fordist system advocated for measuring

productivity and the value of labor over a much longer term. Instead, our current system has taken us in the opposite direction. To help explain this development Andrew Ross in his *Social Text* essay from 2000, “The Mental Labor Problem”, was the first of a number of theorists to point out that what were traditionally considered the privileged components of artistic production—creativity, autonomy, flexibility—have been adopted by business as tools to increase productivity and decrease labor costs. In the “new economy,” bosses offer creative satisfaction and cultural capital instead of living wages. Theorist Brian Holmes’ essay, “The Flexible Personality”, 2001, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en> shows this cross-pollination between business and art to be even more insidious. Pointing out that the anti-hierarchical approach to economic organization was a development of the ‘60s revolt against authority, he explains how neo-liberal social policy experts of the ‘90s capitalized on these values to exploit the “immaterial laborer” (knowledge worker) of the newly developing technological industries. Since then the idea of ‘creative’ work has become a nearly ubiquitous aspect of job descriptions. While it can have many connotations some of which might actually include innovation (although always in the service of the bottom line) ‘creative’ is often a code word for what is now the ideal applicant: someone willing to devote her/himself 24/7 to their work (which in this case means the success of their employer), just as artists have traditionally done, often at the expense of their personal lives.

The burgeoning interest in social practice and socially engaged art that has led to the rediscovery of APG also determines their reception. Many artists, reacting for some time to the effects of deregulation and destructive globalization, are desperate for new models of art production that have the potential to produce change. If APG is to provide an example of engaged practice their work must also, sometimes unfairly, be held up for scrutiny in relation to present day concerns. While it is understandable that current art discourse would find aspects of APG’s work problematic it seems more useful to first consider what they accomplished within their own active period.

Initially very much a part of '60s counter-culture, APG's goal was to bring their anti-authoritarian values into their placement sites. (In another frequently cited exchange an IBM director responded to one of Steveni's placement requests with the following: "If you are doing what I think you are doing, I wouldn't advise my company to have anything to do with you...") Now, however, not only have these values been coopted by neo-liberalism to exploit workers as Ross and Holmes have shown, they have also been used to dismantle 'bureaucratic' social welfare systems in the name of the free market and individual empowerment. Building on these ideas, performance historian and theorist Shannon Jackson, in her 2011 book *Social Works* has lamented that we are now experiencing the consequences of this retreat to "individualization", produced by both government and industry, in the form of a growing economic and social instability. While not claiming that art has the capacity to restore balance to an increasingly uneven field Jackson proposes that it can set an example, bridging the gap (and deconstructing the difference) between self-construction (autonomy) and interdependence, citing Duchamp, the Situationists, Fluxus and Kaprow, among many others, as pioneers in the breakdown of this duality. Although she does not mention APG, they certainly belong among this group. Moving outside art institutions to take art making in a radically new direction, they reached out to a very different audience--one that could potentially receive their work as part of its own everyday experience. If they seemed to place an exaggerated importance on the creative process they also demystified it, taking its systems and principles out of rarefied art confines and into the workaday world, testing what could happen if they placed value on the everyday, within the everyday. By bringing their 'services' to industries, transportation companies, businesses, development corporations, hospital boards, new towns--what Peter Eleey has called the 'infrastructure that serves communities'--APG acknowledged them as equal partners in the production of culture. Pursuing a collective and collaborative approach to society at a time when autonomy held sway, they offer a unique example of art's capacity to be constructive as well as resistant, especially in our present moment of chaos and decline. Having convinced us that context isn't everything, APG's legacy challenges us to seek out circumstances and create 'events'

where art can continue to do 'half the work'.

Maureen Connor, 2012

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<sup>1</sup> *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography* by Guy-Ernest Debord

<sup>2</sup> <http://stuarttait.com/writing/phd-thesis/chapter-3/>

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_Schütz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Schütz)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.stuartbrisley.com/media/6533800434b321f403d6a38.42306692.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.davidharding.net/?page\\_id=15](http://www.davidharding.net/?page_id=15) **David Harding** MEMORIES AND VAGARIES: the development of social art practices in Scotland from the 60s to the 90s