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[Incidental People](#)

Posted in August 25th, 2009 By [Sue Bell Yank](#) [No Comments »](#)



Barbara Steveni and John Latham, Artist Placement Group (APG)

@ [apexart](#) coming up...

The Incidental Person

Curated by Antony Hudek

January 6 to February 20, 2010

Opening reception: January 6, 6-8 pm

“The “Incidental Person” was coined by the British artist John Latham (1921-2006) to qualify the status of an artist involved in non-art contexts such as government or large corporations. This exhibition expands on Latham’s original definition of the Incidental Person to include those persons for whom all aspects of life – political, social, esthetic, professional – are integrated into a unified whole. The new Incidental Person can be an artist, but does not need to be since for her or him meaningful production is not the exclusive property of any one member of society: the Incidental Person can be anyone as long as each of her or his actions partakes of a larger, unified life practice.

The exhibition argues that the Incidental Person stakes out a new position, outside of the 20th-century triad Joseph Beuys-Marcel Duchamp-John Cage. Unlike the latter, the Incidental Person does not seek to solve the “art-life” or “mind-body” problems. Instead, she or he fails to see them as problems at all, since for the Incidental Person art, life, mind, and body cannot be understood in opposition to one another. But this does not mean that the Incidental Person declares that anything can be art, as Duchamp suggested with the readymade. Rather art itself becomes subsumed under a larger, all-inclusive category of motions or things that bear the elusive imprint of Incidentalness. And while the Incidental Person shares Beuys’ interest in pedagogy, she or he eschews the self-mythologizing of the avant-garde: if you do not recognize the Incidental Person walking past you in the street, this is probably because you have yet to learn what makes their life-practice Incidental – and vice-versa. This exhibition bring together persons formerly known as “artists”, “writers”, “technicians”, and “bureaucrats”, who imbue their everyday existence with Incidentalness. In particular, the exhibition will underscore aspects of the Incidental Person’s life-work that do not appear obviously “artistic”, thus becoming a pedagogical forum to learn how to recognize and act out the potential behind seemingly disparate gestures, regardless of their

professional or aesthetic tags.”

Interesting thought, this idea of “incidentalness” and life-practice. I’ve been reading a bit about the fascinating Lygia Clark, who like Latham, brought together conceptions of time, mortality, metaphysics and the body in her practices. She said she “longed to live like the hand of a clock; passing a thousand times through the same route.” Ever concerned with divisions between the past and the future, this sense of time defined the wholistic conception of her practice. She said, “With me it is always like this – while I live a thousand turns of the earth the rest of the people here are marking out time, with rare exceptions, going backwards, and nothing is dynamic, everything is pause or death.”



Lygia Clark

A language of critique can be formed around life-practices such as these, as evidenced in the truly stunning survey of conceptual art curated by Peter Eeley at the Walker Art Center, [“The Quick and the Dead.”](#) Eeley’s cogent essay on the works of artists like Clark, Robert Barry, George Brecht, On Kawara, James Lee Byars, Tacita Dean and others highlight these concerns with death, time, and the metaphorical object.

Yet the notion of the Incidental Person that Latham puts forth and Hudek will attempt to expand upon in this exhibition might be more problematic to discuss in such a manner. Many artists concerned with social practice are “incidental people” inserted into political and social arenas as problem-solvers, but where do the parameters and limits of their artistic practices exist? It is problematic to call everything that an artist does in a social or political realm an “artwork.” Are the workings of government or community or social service utilized only as the context for performativity? Are the artists actually “solving problems,” somehow pointing out problems that no one else can see? I could cite many examples, from Merle Laderman Ukeles’s “Touch Sanitation,” during which the artist was in residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation, to John Latham’s stint at the Scottish Office’s Development Agency (through the Artist Placement Group). Besides these insertions, there is also the question of artist-conceived organizational structures that are called artworks, like Rick Lowe’s Project Row Houses or Watts House Project. Is this a strategic in some way, positioning these entities in an “innovative” categorization (not to mention funding and development), or is there a larger intellectual and conceptual artistic process at work? Something special and unique that an artist brings that no one else can, a revelatory experience?

It's certainly a romantic notion, but I struggle with it. And if it's true, what about these other "incidental people" that Hudek speaks of? The engineers, the scientists, the technicians, and the bureaucrats? I can't help but believe that there is some hierarchy, some question of authorship, and general muddiness about shoehorning these artists/non-artists into a curated art show that is not being addressed here.

(Thanks to Aimee Chang for the conversation that led to some of these questions).

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