Mute

COUNTDOWN TO ZERO, COUNT UP TO NOW (AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST PLACEMENT GROUP)

By Pauline van Mourik Broekman & Josephine Berry , 28 November 2002

We hear a lot about the disappearance of the public sphere these days. We also hear a lot about a group of 1960s conceptualists called the Artist Placement Group, who brokered some of the earliest artists' residencies in industry and government in the UK. In 1966, when APG was founded, the art world regarded 'tangling with the dirt' of commerce and the public sector as an anomaly, even an aberration within art. Today, on the other hand, such tangling has come to define large swathes of artistic practice. Operating with few precedents, APG worked hard to formulate a rigorous methodology of engagement – one that makes many of today's ubiquitous residencies appear complacent, and complicit, by comparison. With art having long since burst its disciplinary banks, APG's early excursions outside the white cube's perimeter also shed light on the emerging hybrid landscape of business art, art & science, socially engaged art and even network art. This summer, Josephine Berry and Pauline van Mourik Broekman talked to APG co-founders Barbara Steveni and John Latham, both artists in their own right, and discovered their sometimes quite different approaches to the organisation and its implications

Key:**JB** > Josephine Berry**JL** > John Latham**BS** > Barbara Steveni**PB** > Pauline van Mourik Broekman

JB: Could you describe the cultural context in which APG and its thinking came about?

JL: It's a quite complicated beginning. I was teaching in St. Martins and Barbara came up with this idea: why don't we go into the factories? These were no-go areas at that moment – and I think she had contact with the Fluxus group. There were high tensions in the art world about having anything to do with organisations of the industrial-commercial kind. They wanted to use art as something prestigious.

BS: Might I come in there? John was in America just at the time, and the Fluxus group came to stay in our house and they were going to do an exhibition in, I think it was called Gallery One – they wanted some material. And I said, I'll go to the outer circular road, to the industrial estate, and I'll pick up some material. So I went there, and I got lost in the industrial estate, and it was dead of night, but the factory was absolutely booming away and I thought: well why aren't we here? Not to pick up buckets of plastic, but because there's a whole life that we don't touch. This is what people go on about – academics, artists, politicians – but they go nowhere near it. That was where the idea got born, and when John came back I told him about it.

At that time, artist types like Stuart and Deborah Brisley, John, myself and others, were doing events and happenings in the street – like Peter Kuttner's Nodnol Lives. Very much out of the gallery and into the street. Looking at a reaction against the object and its value for the market – so that was the sort of context out of which it came. As John was saying, the whole idea of fine artists having anything to do with commerce and stuff was, like, real dirty. But the idea of context, 'Context is Half the Work' which John coined, developed into a main APG/O+I axiom [APG became Organisation and Imagaination (O+I) in 1989] through to today, developed as a result of making approaches to industry.

JB: Were you interested in Russian Constructivism as an example of artists going into industrial situations and contexts. Was that known about in London at that time?

BS: It was known about, and especially John was much more into art history. I was into life experience. In fact I had no schooling.

JL: At that time, I was oblivious of art history. I just did what I'd been touched off by as an art experience. It was like seeing something so intensely moving that I had to understand it. And I didn't bother about the art history. When people talked about Picasso I said, well who's he?

BS: And I became very interested, when going into the factories, in the social role of the people, the individuals in there, and how they were connecting up to what they were doing. And what was it that the organisation was doing that they were in. And all that developed out of a real interest and questioning which I guess now would be called research. I think they thought I was a sociologist since I'd remarked at British Leyland, for example, on the fact that women worked only in the trimming shops, but they couldn't be found in other parts of the factory. So my interest was in the role and the purpose of individuals, and their relation to the wider unit beyond, and John's was what the language was doing.

JB: Was meshing your quite different sensibilities around APG a fairly natural progression? You're saying that you had this more hands-on sociological approach and John was interested in, you might say, more esoteric areas of physics and language.

JL: I want to answer that one. I was a brush painter, gone into what it was I'd been hit by. As a brush painter, it was a completely irrelevant thing to do to think about having anything to do with anything else really. It was a closed little research establishment to put it in a friendly way – or a waste of time, to put it in another. But I met two scientists, C.C.L. Gregory and Anita Kohsen, who were crossing their disciplines, and who were very dedicated to finding what the difference was between physical and human animal behaviour. Now they'd gone into partnership and we got an introduction to meet them because they lived in the neighbourhood and, as time went on, they suddenly paid a visit, and the professor of astronomy said: Would you like to do a mural for a party we're giving on Halloween night? Now I've told this story before, but the long and the short of it is that I discovered that a spray gun is a very meaningful instrument for getting over what had happened in painting – which was a countdown to zero. A countdown to zero starts from complete confidence in spatial appearances and in the skill that you've got in the mid 19th century, say with Delacroix, to a complete rejection of the idea that the spatial appearance of the world is anything but an illusion. That life is an illusion. And it was emphasised by the discoveries from Max Planck in 1900, who came up with the idea of the discrete bit, that everything was made up of discrete events basically. And you don't find an interval between the discrete events. And this was very important because scientists can't talk about event structure. Physicists refer to waves and particles in space-time.

PB: And how did this relate to the spray gun?

JL: This is accounting for it after the event. There had been a blank unmarked canvas exhibited as a work and what that meant was that all art is on a par with no action. That was a very high powered, challenging statement.

JB: Was that Rauschenberg?

JL: Yes. Well, he worked a lot with Cage, and Cage may have been responsible for the idea in the beginning – a zero sound concert – the same kind of thing. But what was important was the blank white board, and taking the spray gun to register a history on it with discrete marks of an accretive process that had permanence. Once a point mark has gone down, it doesn't disappear. And an inference that I drew later on was that this is an insistently recurrent event that makes it seem permanent. And an insistently recurrent event is like a quantum unit of light, it doesn't have an interval between its discrete bits. I think you'll come to see that this is very important: what we regard as time is counting. Counting via caesium atoms, clocks, days, years. And very high frequencies in the Planck world give us new techniques. It goes down to something really beyond what we can either repeat or imagine. An initial Insistently Recurrent Event (IRE) is an oscillation between nothing – the blank canvas – and a point mark, and it translates as a proto-event universe.

JB: If you extrapolate from that, does that oscillation suggest the ever present and explosive possibility of transformation? If reality has to reaffirm itself in this insistently recurrent way, is that an instability?

JL: The most logical series is what I'm really talking about. What we have to do is get past this idea of the Big Bang having started out of nothing. Physics has come to a point where it's very practical. You can find out what happens with most things. But it's got a problem, which Stephen Hawking refers to about once every ten years. And that is an admission that – and he said it in so many words – we don't know where to begin. At one time it was, 'if we haven't solved it by the end of century we won't know where to begin.' And at the end of the century he said on CNN: 'let the twenty years start now.' It was the admission that it's too big a problem and we don't know where to begin.

Well, the arts had proposed not that the world starts with a bang but that it starts from a prehistory of an event structure which has a non-extended starting line, equivalent to the score in music, that's to say, not heard as sound. A non-extended state doesn't show up in physics, it's not allowed. What you do find though, and one of the ideas that compensates for it is called a vacuum. Now vacuum is a spatial word, you can't have vacuum in no space, or it's a nonsense to talk about it. But they can talk about it happily because there's a quantum vacuum which means the non-space in between the two extended states which form the positive side of the wave. The vacuum is a state nought – very easy to translate into artists terms. If you go into the structure of a concert you experience a clock time duration; a thing starts with a waving of a stick, say, and ends with another waving of a stick. This is in 'count' time, say in the minutes between the start and the finish. The performance is an ordering of time-bases or frequencies, rhythms, and pause lengths. With the score aspect of time these make up the three components of three dimensional time, which now constitute the dynamics of a musical performance. So there you've got a score which is timeless apparently, but it has such control over what goes on in time that you have an equivalent there for an atemporal, omnipresent coding. It's not a coding so much as a matrix of previous experience.

JB: Is that the Least Event for you?

JL: Can I say yes? The Least Event in music, you could understand as somebody recognising that a sound was interesting and feeling the do-it-again impulse. The do-it-again impulse is equivalent to saying insistently recurrent. Those two ideas belong together, because what then happens is we'll do it again and then we'll do it differently. And if you can think of a proto-event, a universe in a state where there isn't anything, a total zero extension in space and time, if you can imagine that series in a non-extended context, and it then becomes a habit within that non-extended state, you find that there are performances which are enactments from a score which grow in complexity all the time.

Well, the event-structured world is what the artist naturally works in. We work in it, deriding all the common sense objections and adulations and all the blah-blahs that come in from the outside and which are totally irrelevant to what goes on that's exciting to do, say, on a wall. It's that interest, that kind of impulse which is important because it reveals the actual universe to people who are totally blown by the fact that, to quote Stephen Hawking, we don't know where to begin. They all seem to know what they ought to do next because they have a medium for how to exchange value. And it's flawed just the same as the verbal medium.

JB: You mean money?

JL: Language and money together.

PB: Sticking with the cultural context of the '60s, if you were engaged with this critique of objects and their role as vehicles of value in the art system, how did your critique of language relate to the fact that a lot of other artists were precisely using language as an agent of dematerialisation, as a questioning, philosophical method – all of which they thought could challenge the same system of value, objects and spatial relations?

JL: I think what was intensely interesting in the history of ideas is that people always thought in a dualistic way. They've always thought that things are things, but we are not things. We are inhabited by mysterious forces. The most recent quotee is Descartes, who set philosophy on the course of two worlds. There came a point in the early 20th century, in Cambridge, where you found Bertrand Russell cooperating in mathematical philosophy. And he got a communication from Vienna, from Wittgenstein, who as a young punter had said: how about this, is this any use, or is it total nonsense? And Russell wrote back and said: no it's wonderful, come over and talk to us about it. And the nugget of what Wittgenstein was on about was that they would talk through and discover an atomic proposition or perhaps a set of atomic propositions which are basic and indestructible.

JB: For language you mean?

JL: For language and logic. It's an attempt to systematise language logic. If we actually go into what then happened – 1912 I think was the initial date in a period where the idea of the Tractatus was being written. He argued the case of the atomic propositions and it got published at the end of the World War One. Wittgenstein had to go and fight in the Austrian army. He then returned to Cambridge and found that he didn't get on with anybody except the economist Keynes. That was his last sort of friend there, and he disappeared to Norway and places. He was thoroughly frustrated when things didn't work for the atomic propositions.

Well, 1951 is the date that I quote anyway, of the Cage and Rauschenberg zero action works. It's also the date of the posthumous publication of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations which says, at the beginning, that the idea of the atomic propositions must have been mistaken. I'll now go over the bits and bits, sorting out what we mean by and what are useful types of expression. And he's famous for the second. But he's famous for starting a movement in philosophy which then went into its opposite, into reverse. He was the trigger for a big effort to get,

even with what physics had found out, at the indestructible basic unit which is still not there. It wasn't identified. We're still looking for a particle, still spending billions of pounds in crashing one particle against another in these circuits, looking for an initiating particle or state.

Well, the point for us is that if you think in terms of event, you don't go into all that language and all those heavy equations about the behaviour of matter because we've found forms for visualising the event structure. It's represented on the back of my Time-Base Roller as a memory, like a piece of music, which has got all music behind it so it can go as far back as a proto-Universe. Whereas one bit of an extended state has neither location nor interval. Two Least extended states together set up what we call time, the initial kind of extendedness. We then go to scientific people and they tend to say, well you've got to actually describe what space is, and we talked to someone who was interested in the idea and he said, well you've got to account for space somehow. And I had this argument out with David Park, a professor of astronomy or astrophysics. Anyway he was in the Williamstown USA Observatory. He had written a paper called 'Are Space and Time Necessary?' and it turned up mysteriously on my desk and I was amazed, so I read it. And 'necessary' meant, in a philosophical sense, do we need to talk about them, are they structural?

JB: Good question.

JL: I wrote to him saying, I've got this paper of yours and I'm sending you a photograph of the Roller that had been in the Tate. The Tate hadn't bought it, but it got shown and photographed, so I could send him a good photograph. He wrote back saying this is really extraordinary, I had no idea that an artist might be interested in what we're interested in. And a certain amount of dialogue came about and I said "why is it that you physicists don't regard the event as parent of the particle?" The answer I got was: "in principle you're probably right, but in all our equations we have gravity, gravity occurs in all our mathematics, and we can't get gravity into events." Now in my forms, gravity shows up as the 'coming to an end' of a score being played out. The internal dynamic on the gravity scale is that all events tend to coincide at a zero or dimensionless point. In General Relativity, density of matter in space finally translates from zero space, zero time, infinite temperature into an infinitely rich score somewhere, like in a drawer.

JB: Could we make a transition to art more directly? You say that the '50s was a zero point in art – a kind of compression of all of art history into a non-gesture. I'm interested in how you see the conceptual artists' interest in language, a decade on from that point, in which they were trying to escape from the finality of the object. Was that a zero point in itself?

JL: Short answer is, no.

JB: Why not?

JL: The date of the spray gun paintings might have coincided with a lot of other activity. Obviously it did. See the difference is between a mark that goes across the surface and one which hits it vertically as a point. The point mark is an extension of the zero action works, and blows in a new question as to nature's tabula rasa, a non-extended state as active where the received idea is that any 'nothing' state has to be passive. Newton's claim 'ex nihilo nihil fit' is flawed. The answer to your question is that the zero point is not just neutrally zero in meaning. It is that a non-extended but omnipresent score is inherited from long generations of this universe and begins from an active component in the zero which corresponds to many parts of the culture including both sciences and faiths.

For me personally, conceptual artists and their language-based solutions were chasing the wrong hare. And the real one was the problem that Wittgenstein had come across, and that philosophy had come across – that language was a flawed medium. It didn't do what it set out to do in the most serious instances. So what had been known for all the previous centuries, the belief systems and sacred texts which had come out from the prophets – had all recognised not to try and be logical; take it from the inspired source.

JB: How did these ideas connect to your preoccupation with artists doing placements, and an engagement particularly with the state and industry? And why were you led to engage with the establishment as a means of siting art in a more socially engaged context, rather than creating something like an alternative space of action?

BS: I think that it was very exciting to come across contexts – I'm answering this instinctively now – which were very heavily peopled and very full with material, with ongoing processes and unfamiliar activities. A context which had great extensions out and which seemed to be touching possibilities which artists were only trivially touching before. They were very conditioned by, say, promotional desires like Pirelli's desk diaries, etc. The idea that there might be another role within these contexts which obviously have a vast influence on our lives made it seem intriguing in juxtaposition with the way we were coming out of the gallery, and those types of things. Also the media at the time was expanding into new forms – sculpture became inflatable, video was coming up, film and performance. So it seemed like a heavily interesting context to engage with, and the idea that one might change what the engagement

would be in those contexts and could then filter through into the society differently, was instinctively felt at the time as being a very exciting thing to do. Where else might one go? Didn't think so much of setting up an alternative. That wasn't nearly so interesting as what one had stumbled into, this was an alternative. And the possibility that one could stumble into it, and that one could actually have some effect, change things – in both directions – sounds so hideously idealistic ... It's a bit like, 'you can never change anybody, least of all your parents.'

JB: But it felt at the time that there was leeway for change?

BS: Yes, absolutely. When we had our first presentation as APG, the Industrial Negative Symposium which brought artists and industrialists together for the first time, down at the Mermaid Theatre, and the Event Structure Research Group, Jeffrey Shaw, one of APG's founding artists, and Theo Botschuiver came over from Holland, Billy Klüver (really shocking speaker) – anyway, it had a lot of press. I remember the speaker from Esso petroleum saying, I'm glad to see that APG is not asking for support, but to make a contribution. And at another point Gustav Metzger got up and said I want to burn down your factories and the British Oxygen guy walking out….

I do feel that we were virtually responsible for opening up these 'new horizons', or this can of worms that led to all this institutionalisation, both by government departments and corporations, of how the artist might be used, in inverted commas. It was the highjack of what we did as artists by the Arts Council that made it a can of worms. At that time, the context was very exciting and shifting for both sides. It was only by doing the industrial placements that we began to find out how art activity, or how as artists, an optimum association might be developed which complied with making an artwork in these contexts – so that both sides were getting something out of it. So after the industrial placements, which were seen as kind of terrible by the majority of the art world, for tangling with this 'dirt' so to speak – I was personally, and artists that we worked with, able to find out just what sort of exchange and engagement could be had in these situations. What we discovered was that we have to take great care to preserve the integrity of art's motivation vis-à-vis the commercial and political interests around. That's what the Incidental Person or artist's presence is there to contend with and to insist on. But I think it might have opened up a can or worms which is taking it in this institutionalised direction now.

PB: But don't you think this can of worms was the precise same thing that gave you a sense of excitement? Was that engagement with what you call more 'peopled' environments to do with their magnitude, their existing power? Did you think that if you intervened in these places, you could adopt their existing power rather than seeking it in alternative communities?

BS: Well yes! I realise that this is a very hot question, and it demands a very hot answer. I know this question is leveled all the time, and it's a main focus for me right now in today's global 'money-worshipping societies' and I don't have an immediate sound bite.

JL: The difference between the industrial and the government department placements was where the interests lay. If the artists went into the sectional interests, the establishment, they were walking into a fireball. The chances are that it would make more trouble. But the non-sectional interests that a government department has are different; certainly in Britain, the civil service is supposed to be serving the people. It is an institutionalised body that tries to get the elected government to do certain things, but it's always seeking more info from our side. When we got to the civil service, we were under investigation by the research department, Whitehall's research station.

BS: I slightly disagree with what John said about industry, because I was seeing it – as I think were the artists who we were working with – as an engagement we had with individuals and a very important learning process; an exchange with large chunks of society that we'd had no engagement with. I still think of it as a conglomerate of individuals whose activities were impacting on society. And I think a lot was learnt about exchange and stuff. And yes, we went to government, which appeared to have less sectional interests at the time. In the language of today they were also trying to manage change. At the time the thinking might have been, we've got to have these outsiders in here to think differently. We were the outsiders.

JB: Do you think that an understanding of an organisation as a conglomeration of individuals and activities made you also believe that if you could influence key individuals you could influence an entire system in a certain way?

BS: I think that was rather a naïve motivation, but it did feel that that was happening. Especially when the guy from ICI left and became, as he put it, 'APG's first drop-out' from the company. It brought up the whole question of success and failure again – for whom, the organisation, society, the artist? It was to do with the fact that here was a context previously untouched by the art process which appeared now to change – a shift in the mindset perhaps – however naïve it was. I still think that you do have to engage with all the forces that are powerful, in different ways, and that one is also powerful as an individual, that ideas are powerful. You had to get your hands dirty, and I still think you have to get your hands dirty. I think it's about responsibility.

JB: So what do you think about class interests and solidarity then? How does an individual artist go into an industrial situation in which you have class conflict, a conflict of power between workers and capitalists, between workers and management, and operate between those two 'groups'?

BS: Well, very delicately, and ready to be spat out on all occasions. And that was one of the things that we tried to set up. How far could one go without being spat out? And again what would be a relevant activity. What is coming up enormously now, is the question of 'socially engaged art'. What the hell is that? And how is the aesthetic talking, the actual power of the aesthetic, or the power of the process of engagement. This is being found out and demonstrated through the whole explosion of 'artists in residence' that is coming out of our ears now. But I haven't quite answered your class thing. I had a personal thing which was that – although I was obviously a nice middle class girl and everything – not going to school, I didn't have an identification like that. They were all people to me and I automatically asked the question at all moments. I was responsible for being me.

PB: Do you mean that not having had an education you didn't feel socially situated in a way?

BS: Yes, certainly, I've never felt socially situated. Because I wasn't brought up by my parents. I didn't go to school. Anyhow, APG and I have been very heavily attacked for going in there very naively, and not thinking, not dealing with class. But the point is that I think that artists have a responsibility to the impact of their insights when in these various engagements – as did APG input.

PB: Why was the self-consistency of APG's identity, one might say the preservation of its unique identity, so important to effecting the wider aim of transforming the social role of the artist?

BS: Part of maintaining the uniqueness of APG/O+I is, perhaps the opaqueness of its terminology, for instance the 'Incidental Person'. The Incidental Person was a useful way of describing a new socially engaged artist, or a new socially engaged role for a person that has come from the art trajectory, that John dreamed up to distinguish it from the word 'artist' that we had to get away from because of all its baggage. (Incidentally, for the Industrial Negative Symposium, Stuart and John jointly wrote a paper on the disappearance of the artist). So, I feel that in relation to your question about uniqueness, that terminology was very useful to begin to define a new role which had come out of first working in industry and then government. The term was linked to the methodology we tried to develop in order to gain the maximum possibilities for exchange and development and new ideas. You also asked whether our idea could to be taken on by anybody else. Yes, certainly – using the Incidental Person was and is a good way of identifying a change of role for the artist. So I guess the term stands historically along with its method of engagement for those with the understanding to 'use' it.

JL: It is important to note that you could actually tangle with the money. The Incidental Person, and O+I's possessiveness has to do with the responsibility one has to host bodies. Supposing that we got to the Department of Education or whatever, if we gave them something really hot and they took it up, we wouldn't let them simply say they we invented it. We wanted – and I put it down in The Report of a Surveyor – a way of assessing what the contribution was after a placement, after an association. Any good results needed insisting on. What has happened is that the Arts Council is composed of people who are supposed to maintain the status quo. And it's a total disaster because it means no artist is actively allowed in there. As Donald Macrae apparently said: 'Only the established may innovate. No innovator is established.' Basel Bernstein quotes it in his book.

JB: Was it also ever your intention to introduce really truly incidental people into these positions? Without the qualification of the art academy and so on?

BS: Absolutely. It was to try and develop a completely new role, and therefore ask how it comes up through education. One of the things we are trying to do possibly with the London Institute, is to see how the experience can be taken into education, how it can be taken on in a range of areas. This is a different role.

JL: As a self-funding body O+I has got to be responsible for turning out the goods, and arguing the goods, against the opposition. So Incidental Persons as participants need to be well enough informed to cope with the job. Now, if they're not trained in art, they would be liable to be tripped up. That said, the empowerment which it ought to give to everybody is where anyone can come across very good insights. The most unexpected insights can come to the most improbable people and instead of being dismissed as being too improbable to talk to, as one is by the local bureaucracy, or the arts bureaucracy, that should effect something like what Joseph Beuys was doing in his way. Joseph said that the Incidental Person is a YES solution.

JB: In effect, you might argue that today, in what is called the knowledge economy, or within creative industries, what is being assimilated into production is precisely the creative impulse, the virtuosity, the psychic or social experience that might have previously been left out of industrial technique. In a sense you could argue that everyone has become an Incidental Person within the knowledge economy – at least potentially – but in the most

debased way. But do you also see something hopeful in that condition where administration and production now assimilate precisely the kind of imaginative, creative impulses that they formerly excluded?

BS: Well yes, but it's being taken in this most appalling direction, where it's the money that determines things.

PB: In a funny way, maybe it brings up language and the event again? If we're saying what's being imported are language elements, or art-like language, to stimulate innovation, creativity, change, etc., maybe language can have a positive role if we insist on its greater precision. Specificity could be used to combat the lazy blurring of definitions of artistic activity and commercial production, and instead be made to really describe not obscure what people do.

BS: That's exactly what has to be done.

PB: Digital culture is suffused with the rhetoric of dematerialisation, time-based processes, social collaboration, interactivity and collective authorship – do you feel any affinity with it?

JL: Not if it reasserts the space-based mindset. Collaboration is not one of the words we would be defined by.

BS: Oh!? But social collaboration has to be something I personally believe in for O+I, provided it can be heard above the rhetoric and not commodified by digital culture.

JL: This issue is around (failed) space-based belief systems and a Time-and-Event means of representing the real world. The event-structured media are inclusive where the space-based are divisive.

Pauline van Mourik Broekman <pauline AT metamute.org> is co-editor of Mute magazineJosephine Berry <josie AT metamute.org> is deputy editor of Mute magazine