

Dates

Opening times
Friday 12 May–Sunday 14 May, 12–6pm

Opening Event
Friday 12 May, 6–8pm
In-Conversation with
Christopher Steenson and Sasha Engelmann
Sunday 14 May, 3pm

Location

Flat Time House
210 Bellenden Rd
London SE15 4BW

Curated by

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Breath Variations is part of the MA Curating Contemporary Art Graduate Projects 2023, Royal College of Art, in partnership with Flat Time House.

Artist

Christopher Steenson

Guest Speaker

Sasha Engelmann

Flat Time House

Curator/Director
Gareth Bell-Jones
Associate Curator
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BREATH VARIATIONS

Prioritising attention through modes of deep listening

As is written in ‘Offer for Sale’ regarding ‘the structure principles of Delta’: ‘...If however one of these systems shows a change of state a different time-based event is drawn to mind – possible change of future activity alerts a different order of attention that is of import in proportion to the time-base in question...’¹

American composer of post-war experimental and electronic music Pauline Oliveros (1932-2016) used the term deep listening to define how ‘complex wave forms continuously transmitted to the auditory cortex from the outside world by the ear require active engagement with attention’². As curators, we have interpreted deep listening as a radical departure from the capitalist structures that surround us. These ideas gave us the tools to reach a wider ecological and cosmological context, one that centres on relationality and connectedness. We can slow down, hear, process, nurture, create. We are no longer machines, producing, consuming and spending. We are always surrounded by noise, but do we really take the time to listen? Deep listening opens space for a reciprocal exchange of energies between ourselves and that which we choose to pay attention to. Furthermore, it is a practice that foregrounds how we can speculate on alternative value systems beyond capitalist, production driven economies by engaging with different modes of attention.

These ideas share conceptual similarities with John Latham’s alternative system of value and ‘unit of attention’, ‘Delta’. According to Latham, Delta represented an alternative to systems based around monetary value, such as the pound sterling. Latham’s concept put forth the idea that ‘time spent engaged with a subject was a more appropriate guide to value than object or monetary value’. Delta was outlined in great detail in *Offer For Sale* (1974), a financial report which Latham proposed to representatives of the UK government. In this document, Latham calculated the potential financial value of his ‘unit of attention’. By estimating the financial value of Delta, Latham contradicts one of its core principles, which was to provide an

alternative to systems of monetary value. This leads us to the following questions: is it possible for intangible and non-exchangeable concepts such as Delta to be adopted at the institutional or governmental level? Or can such ideas only be applied in opposition to such formalised structures?

This is still relevant now as we are constantly overwhelmed by a relentless flow of information. In this light, it is clear that various economic actors compete to make themselves stand out and capture our precious attention. We are treated as a scarce commodity in a capitalist system which only values hyper-production. From the industrial revolution, we have inherited the sense that our lives are shaped by our ability to produce, sacrificing the great need for community and connectedness in the pursuit of profit. This attention economy that we still endure alienates and individuates us. More than that, it fractures our bonds and interconnectivity with each other.

In many ways, deep listening can heal this fracture. It allows us the possibility of creating meaningful bonds between ourselves and the world around us. We are no longer detached and controlling our environment, rather, we allow ourselves to let go and be moved by what we hear. In such a web of relations, humans are no longer at the centre of the world – an idea that has been termed ‘anthropocentrism’ – rather, we are one of many agents of equal importance. We become open to alternative modes and ecologies of relations. We allow ourselves to be shaped and affected by various elements. The earth’s value is no longer limited to how it can serve us, but rather how we can listen with and attend to it.

¹ John Latham, *Offer for Sale* (1971) p19-20, a financial report detailing the activities of the Artist Placement Group and presented to the Arts Council on the occasion of the 1971–72 Hayward.

² Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice* (iUniverse, New York, 2005) p.21.

Curatorial Appendix

By Hyora Yang, Liyin Wang, Napas Mangklatanakul, Cindy He

Time is invisible. Yet it can be perceived through the visible, audible, tactile, olfactible, etc. Through the process of breathing, residing, overlapping, and circulating, the texture of time can be made tangible. The omnipresent nature of time is similar to that of breath to living entities. Just as the rhythm of breath varies, time also has variations which co-exist in our surroundings. Throughout the research process, the curatorial team has explored the materialisation of time, and how it can be sensed intuitively beyond productive apparatus. This *Curatorial Appendix* delves into themes of *breathing, residing, overlapping, and circulating* with the aim to visualise temporalities and their respective textures and values as they accelerate and decelerate through time and space.

Breathing

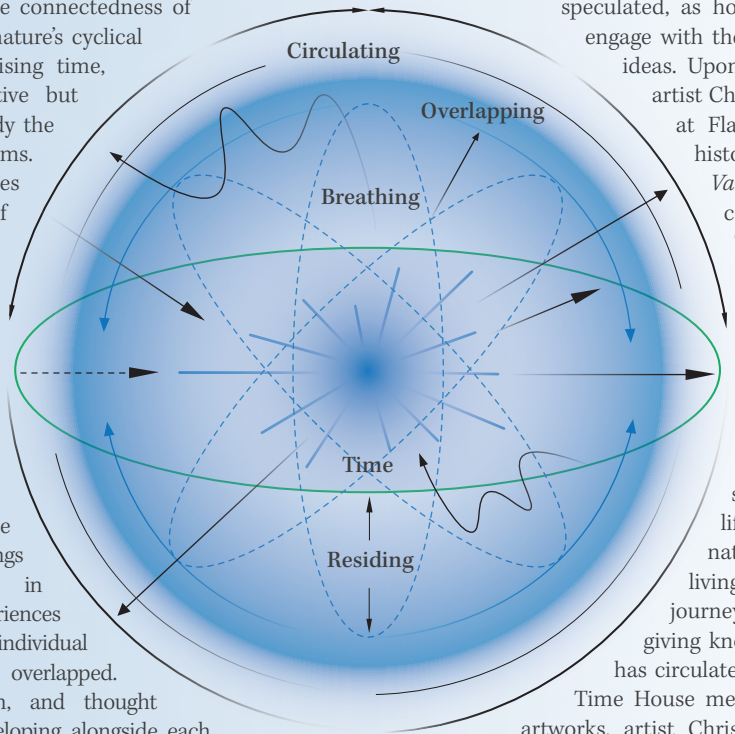
Breathing exists as a transitive mode of mediation between the internal and external spaces of the body. Similarly to the passing of time, breathing is a natural and automatic function of life as well as an invisible state. Responding to Flat Time House as a living organism, the curatorial team attempted to conceive a way of sensing the embodied nature of time. Inspired by John Latham’s ideas, the team has interpreted the artist residency format as open-ended cycles of respiration that give ‘omnipresent durations’ which create inestimable value without time boundaries of past, present, or future. Breathing presents organic forms of temporality and operates as a synaesthetic apparatus of time and space. During the residency, Christopher Steenson recorded diverse breaths, combining these to form a mutual airflow shared between various dynamics of artist/curator, inside/outside, and human/non-human. Entangled breaths show how these various relationships reside and circulate in time and space. Our curatorial research led us to host an artist residency as a way to explore the connectedness of living organisms with nature’s cyclical processes, by materialising time, which appears repetitive but does not always embody the same modes or rhythms. Thus, breathing activates the intrinsic value of time and space that constructs entangled organisms.

Overlapped breaths resonate with the sound of land and beings. The moment that all beings spend time together in space builds new experiences and perspectives for individual timelines which are overlapped. Breath, time, attention, and thought are in motion and developing alongside each other in parallel. The dynamics are shifted around different parts. As the project developed, and specifically during the artist residency period, the symphony of voices from the artist, curators, and the institution were explicit. The overlapping of ideas from individuals were brought together and became more clear. During the exhibition, multi-layered thoughts will emerge when audiences begin to experience the artwork on site and start to think about the connections between sound, visual, sensory and personal experience. After the exhibition, various thoughts will be expanded through attention and conversation.

Overlapping

¹ R.Hewison, “ ‘Incidental Person’: John Latham and Flat Time House, 1985-2021”, in *Passport to Peckham: Culture and Creativity in a London Village* (London, Goldsmiths Press, 2022), p.148.

² Diagram for “time”, illustrated by Hyora Yang.



Residing indicates spending a duration of time at a certain place, breathing with the environment, and overlapping a period of one’s lifetime with the history of a location. The act of residing in Flat Time House forms a continuous and circulating process. John Latham moved into 210 Bellenden Road, converting the building into a home-studio. Over time he began to think of the space as being a ‘living sculpture’ that he termed Flat Time House in reference to his theory of time. This living sculpture continues to be activated after his passing by the presence of artists in residence in the house. Being one of Latham’s guests across time, a group of curators started to look into the home of his thoughts, Flat Time House. After situating themselves in the spatio-temporal context, the curatorial team speculated, as hosts, on inviting different artists to engage with the space for extending their creative ideas. Upon the invitation, the commissioned artist Christopher Steenson was in residence at Flat Time House to learn about its history, as a guest. As a result, *Breath Variations* opens to new guests who come to experience the exhibition. Through such an interactive relay of being guests and hosts, entangled connections were built up and carried on through different times: the past, present and future.

The flow of air inhaling and exhaling through the human respiratory system sustains life. In ecological life cycles, circulating refers to the natural movements of air, tides, and living beings. Throughout this curatorial journey and through the act of receiving and giving knowledge, experience and inspiration has circulated amongst the curatorial team, Flat Time House members, John Latham’s archives and artworks, artist Christopher Steenson, and their wider surroundings. Being a site of learning and a contemporary artist’s residency space, Flat Time House as a living organism is constantly circulating Latham’s ideas within different dimensions of time, while articulating itself as the composting ground for nurturing individuals and collective creative growth. Each individual being has their own circulation and rhythm of time. By shifting individual attentions to a wider ecological and cosmological context, *Breath Variations* attempts to problematise standardised time cycles, which capitalist value systems and structures impose on our daily life.

Circulating

“Language had divided time; there was linear time, but there was also ‘omnipresent time’, an a-temporal time that was ‘non-extended’. it might be expressed as memory, or, as Latham put it: ‘a world which changes and a world which does not change.’”¹

Residing