

STEPHEN WILLATS – LANGUAGES OF DISSENT

May 25 – August 18, 2019

Since the early 1960s, the pioneering British conceptual artist Stephen Willats (b. London, 1943) has seen his work as a social process, establishing an approach to art practice that has led him beyond the confines of studio, gallery, and institution and into social spaces outside the art context. Engaging different participants is central to his artistic work, redefining the relationships between artist and audience. This interactive approach has led him to realize projects in the actual settings where people's lives are lived, focusing on creative and productive responses to social polemics. Modernist housing complexes of the postwar decades, the experimental underground club scene, or places on London's urban periphery where teenagers find refuge from the pressures of their lives: these are the scenes where Willats explores creative behaviours that serve to recode society's norms and conventions. Developing his participatory approach, he looked beyond art to find tools in other disciplines concerned with communication, looking at studies in the theory of semiotics, behaviour and learning and then in cybernetics.

Curator:
Heike Munder
(Director, Migros Museum
für Gegenwartskunst)

An accompanying publication of the same title, with essays by Bronac Ferran, John Kelsey, Andrew Wilson, and Heike Munder, will be released on occasion of the opening.

Stephen Willats' solo exhibition *Languages of Dissent* brings together key works from his practice since the 1960s to the present. Dissent or resistance as a creative strategy appears in Willats's work in a variety of forms and motifs. As a signal trait of his art, it is also a personal stance: an unrelenting opposition to all that is established, standardized, linear. In a career that spans more than four decades, Willats teases out the implications of normative role models over and over again.

In the following, individual topics are briefly presented. For detailed information please consult the labels in the gallery.

Neighbourhood Projects

Based on his understanding of art as a social process and a form of communication, Stephen Willats developed projects in direct collaboration with the residents of different neighbourhoods in the early 1960s. His examinations are often centred on people who have little connection with the field of art and come from socially deprived areas. This participatory approach helped him to rethink the relationship between artist, artwork, recipient, and society.

The basis for this is Willats' interest in cybernetics, the study of the exploration and modelling of dynamic systems. In particular, in postwar England a new generation of thinkers began to examine the mechanisms of systems of control and communication and apply their insights to diverse fields. Within the sciences, but also in its broader ideological implications, cybernetics exuded a forward-looking spirit of enlightenment; part of its enormous appeal was that it turned the determinism of an authoritarian system of control on its head and opened the door to novel ways of seeing and thinking about phenomena. Stephen Willats is one of the early artists who, in the 1960s, questioned the foundations of the art system and embarked on a critical renegotiation of the form of art as well as its sphere of influence, seeking to devise new models that would bolster its social relevance.

The two diagrams on display are part of the *Social Environment Modelling Project* (1973) and show the theoretical framework from which Willats developed specific neighbourhood projects. His to date most complete project took place in Edinburgh in 1973. In *The Edinburgh Social Model Project* (1973) participants from four different neighbourhoods were asked to document their social and material environment. The project provided a basis of communication between the very different participants who shared their reflections on the kind of future they wanted in these different contexts. In this way, Willats raised awareness of the creative potential to transform for the better.

The West London Social Resource Project (1972-73) was carried out in four neighbourhoods in London. Based on objects found in these areas, the participants of the West London Manual were asked to write down their associations with these objects and the places

MIGROS MUSEUM FÜR
GEGENWARTSKUNST
LIMMATSTRASSE 270
CH-8005 ZÜRICH

T +41 44 277 20 50
F +41 44 277 62 86
INFO@MIGROSMUSEUM.CH

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of discovery, and furthermore, to document their homes and their visions regarding issues such as public transportation. In the second phase, the participants were expected to answer questions about desired changes and improvements in the *Re-modelling Book*. The self-organising, inclusive, and community-based approach of the project was supposed to inspire reflection on social values, behaviour, context-specific language, and environment, and to lower the threshold for participation as well as to stimulate and provide a basis to transform them as a model of society.

Meta Filter (1975)

One of the key works of this exhibition is *Meta Filter* (1975), a computer simulation programmed by Stephen Willats. The installation is equipped with a program that questions two people about their perceptions and reactions to social relationships until a consensus is reached. The participants must try to understand the other perception to find a common solution. The self-organising system is constantly trying to find a balance – a state of homeostasis. Homeostasis is a self-regulating system that steadily changes with outer and inner influences but constantly seeks stability. Willats used the interactive artwork to apply a basic cybernetic principle to a communication process.

Meta Filter is an example of Willats's interest in the development of systems of cooperative participation which allow (often two) users to explore or discuss a topic of choice on varying levels of dissent and consent. It shows the translation of diagrams and models into works with an event character. Recipients are encouraged to handle the objects and thereby transcend their role as passive observers. After four years of development, *Meta Filter* was first presented to the public in London in 1975.

For further explanations on the use of the *Meta Filter*, the guards are at your disposal.

Drawings

Since the 1960s, drawings have played an important role in Stephen Willats's oeuvre as a source of inspiration for ideas, works, and projects. The selection on display ranges from the 1960s to the 1990s. The works are linked by a homeostatic model that extends across the wall. *Homeostat Drawing No. 2* (1969) is based on homeostasis. His perception of the artist as an initiator who is directly connected to the recipient and the work led Willats to break with the traditional understanding of art. The eponymous number alludes to the serial work of the artist who explores different approaches and questions in corresponding complexes of works. At the same time, the drawings manifest different functions and manners of reception. The series *Organic Exercises* is also derived from the idea of homeostasis. Rather than an aesthetic presentation, it is intended as a reflection on the individual in society. In the *Area Development Drawings* and *Orientation Drawings* Willats adopted the reduced language of diagrams to simplify complex correlations and to convey dynamic relationships within social networks. In Willats's practice, diagrams do not serve as explanations, but rather as a way of seeing and changing ways of seeing. He uses them to visualise and conceptualise our social reality. The merging of his examinations of social questions regarding coexistence in residential buildings with ideas derived from cybernetics and systems theory becomes apparent in these drawings. The *Drawings for a Project*, on the other hand, are not diagrams in this sense but preliminary sketches for possible behavioural flows of information. They illustrate information paths and the movements of information in the works on display in the next room.

Early Participation Models

In the late 1950s Stephen Willats started to think about the traditional role of art in society and the relationship between art, work, and viewer. This resulted in an intensive preoccupation, first with theories of behaviour and learning, then with cybernetic questions which enabled him to break through the hierarchical divide between artist and recipient. By creating works that require active involvement, Willats freed the recipients from their solely visual connection with the works. He realised that a direct confrontation with a symbolic but in fact task-based experience has a greater impact on the conscious mind and paves the way for changing perceptions. In the early 1960s this conviction that direct experience is the only way to overcome stereotypical or referential knowledge led him to produce fundamentally collaborative and participatory works. Recipients are invited to help shape the works and to reflect on their decisions in questionnaires. Instead of self-referential works, Willats created symbolic models involving thoughts on self-determination, feedback, and control – keywords of cybernetics. The installation *Environmental Box* (1962) even allows multi-sensual artistic reception. The recipients are invited to feel covered objects and to draw their ideas. In *Organic Exercise No. 1 – Manual Variable Construction* (1962/2019) 48 blocks of plaster on a grid wait to be rearranged by the recipients. The participants

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LIMMATSTRASSE 270
CH-8005 ZÜRICH

T +41 44 277 20 50
F +41 44 277 62 86
INFO@MIGROSMUSEUM.CH

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produce a series of events, a process of constant change in which all contributions are equally significant while the artist provides the offer of creative transformation. For Willats, transformation is a fundamentally creative process accompanied by both physical and psychological re-evaluations. One of Willats's main premises is that every person can bring about change. In this spirit, *Manual Variable No. 2* (1963), *Slot Device No. 2* (1963), and *Colour Variable No. 2* (1963) also encourage recipients to rearrange the shapes on the surface and to record the alterations in a questionnaire. Unfortunately, they can no longer be used as intended for conservational reasons.

Light Works

In 1964 Stephen Willats advanced his participatory approach by confronting recipients with objects in states of constant transformation. In comparison to the *Manual Variables*, he added a technological element and put his artworks in motion with motors. The earliest objects of this group are the *Shift Boxes* (1964). The wooden constructions are equipped with randomly flashing lights that constantly change the visual impression. Viewers are asked to create individual patterns of these light frequencies in order to predict the next flash. However, the lights and the moving components are not guided by an underlying system so that the apparent order found by the participants is constantly challenged. They are thus asked to make a prediction at which they can only fail again and again. Stability and instability or agreement and disagreement permanently alternate. This series was followed by the *Visual Automatics* in which lights flash according to an alpha rhythm. The alpha rhythm represents the wave patterns of a relaxed human brain and disappears with emotional or mental tension. The sculpture influences the recipients on two levels: On the one hand, there is the cognitive desire to bring order to the flashing lights, on the other hand, the brain is encouraged to relax. The *Visual Transmitters* are the most complex of the light objects. Due to the array of stimuli the recipients are subjected to, the relationship between audience, space, and work becomes decidedly overcharged. Instead of contemplating a static object, viewers are challenged to relate to the dynamics of the work. This enforces self-regulation, in other words, a productive reaction somewhere between adaption and refusal. Willats is especially interested in the distinction between autonomous and heteronomous behaviour, the latter being triggered by control mechanisms enforced by fixed patterns in society. He always counterposes these compulsions with possibilities of productive, and thus, creative exploration.

Multiple Clothing

Around 1964 Stephen Willats no longer wanted to call himself an artist as he felt this contradicted his understanding of himself as a mere initiator of processes within social structures. He rejected the self-referentiality of artworks which named him as the author since the artist, the recipients, and the artwork are equally dependent on one another. Instead he called himself a "Conceptual Designer" and wore a white coat to appear more like a scientist and to contextualise his proximity to social reality. One of the main objectives of his artistic work is to initiate interpersonal interaction and to create communicative processes. Clothing is a means of communication people use to position themselves within the social context.

Besides modular clothing with adaptable shapes and colours, there are also bags to which writing can be applied, and helmets with coloured visors that align the perception with the wearer's mood and mindset. The series *Corree Design* comprises individually adaptable pieces of furniture that can serve as chairs, sofas, beds, or even cupboards, depending on the user's needs. In this way, the artist addresses questions regarding identity, identification, and social behaviour. For Willats identity is not a constant, but rather a variable that responds to states of mind, contexts, and times of day. Similarly, the *Doppelgänger* works, such as *Doppelgänger Suit* (1985), refer to different figures in different environments and temporalities. Although this phase as a "Conceptual Designer" did not last long, his Multiple Clothing was an integral part of his work up until the 1990s. The multifunctional objects could be purchased for reasonable prices in several boutiques in England.

Architecture

Stephen Willats's work has been defined by his exploration of the architectural structures of social housing since the 1960s. This interest provides the basis for an understanding of his artistic practice, as it led to whole complexes of works. To this day, people live together at close quarters in London's social housing blocks which once epitomised the utopia of a new way of living in early modernism. Defined by the belief in progress, the suburban housing construction on the outskirts of London represents the promise of an urban development of the future. Today these neighbourhoods are deemed unattractive and engender social stig-

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F +41 44 277 62 86
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matisation. The residents, however, were already confronted with the normalisation and standardisation within these blocks of flats in the 1960s. The monumentality of the tower blocks obscures the complexity of the life within. Works such as the *Conceptual Tower Drawings* provide a diagrammatic insight into the uniform construction of the buildings. Willats represented them as a social model and compared them with a homeostatic scheme. He thereby emphasises the significance of each resident in the complex and contradicts the anonymity dictated by the architecture. These drawings provided the basis for the installation *Cybernetic Still Life No. 3* (2009/2019) which features vases of the same monumentality as the buildings. During his conversations with residents, Willats started to think about the connection between architecture and private objects. Despite the circumstances, the residents continuously find ways to reclaim the standardised space, for instance with a vase. Willats is interested in the subliminal “counter-consciousness” expressed in the creative approach to imposed structures undermining social norms and conventions in favour of individuality.

Wastelands

On his quest for suitable districts in London where he could carry out his neighbourhood projects, Stephan Willats became aware of the wastelands between the residential blocks. These uncultivated, undeveloped fields were used in different ways by the residents of the bordering buildings. They provide a strong contrast to the geometrical structures. To a large extent, these unused sites exist beyond the visible boundaries of socially accepted norms and conventions. The artist was especially interested in the young people who used these fields as communal retreats. Free from the social regulations usually surrounding them, they could indulge in activities missing from their everyday lives. These refuges enabled the adolescents to escape from their not always easy childhoods in the residential blocks. In his works he focused on the creativity expressed in the self-organised confiscation. He collected objects thrown away by the youths: spray tins, cigarette packs, bottles. They allude to the satisfaction of different social and psychological needs – from cycling to glue sniffing to sex. *Two Worlds. Camps* (1981) shows the separate spheres predefined by the buildings. On the one hand, there is the private living space shaped by the architectural guidelines of public construction. On the other hand, there are the wastelands where space can be occupied and used autonomously. *Camps – It Was a Way to Relieve Our Feelings* (1981) resulted from a direct collaboration with Pat Purdy who grew up in the tower blocks of West London, her comment can be found on the collage. Willats worked together with Pat Purdy for several years, she is the protagonist of many of his works.

Night Dwellers

In the 1980s whole series of works resulted from Stephen Willats's exploration of individuals who express their individuality in their private lives – especially at night. Their daytime lives force them into a state of conventionality that adheres to institutional regulations. Only the night gives them the protection they need to indulge in individual forms of expression. Works such as *The Doppelgänger* (1984) focus on these individuals' transformations during and after working hours. The Diptychon shows Paul spending his day in the office in his function as a suit-clad stockbroker. The both physical and psychological transformation he undergoes after work reveals his anarchistic mindset. This is a manifestation of “counter-consciousness”, a term Willats uses to describe an attitude that undermines social norms and conventions. His interest in “counter-consciousness” led Willats from the claustrophobic living spaces in residential blocks to suburban wastelands to an artistic exploration of London's post-punk club culture. The repressive, conservative climate of the Thatcher era saw the emergence of various, usually short-lived clubs that were often only open to a select network of insiders. These venues provided potential for creative expression. The resulting works showcase characters Willats perceived as symptomatic of the different existences of daytime and nightlife. Most of them are mentioned by name and portrayed together with photos, objects, and their own texts. The installation *Living Like a Goya* (1983) evolved in collaboration with Julie Sissons, a fashion designer, who also created clothes for the guests of the Cha Cha Club in London. The club was one of the many privately organised meeting places where, secluded from society, a select clientele could excessively celebrate their individuality. Julie, for instance, styled herself to resemble a work by the Spanish painter Francisco de Goya. This is an example of alienation expressed through creative collective resistance.

Publications

Stephen Willats's artistic call for an integral relationship between work, recipient, and social reality is exemplified by his activities as an author and editor. In the early 1960s he started to distribute typewritten manifestos in the London art scene. Other theoretical texts in

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T +41 44 277 20 50
F +41 44 277 62 86
INFO@MIGROMUSEUM.CH

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artist's books, catalogues, and art magazines are dedicated to the basic principles of his artistic work and generally promote a new, socially engaged form of art. In 1965 Stephen Willats started to self-publish the magazine *Control*. Since the first edition, the focus has been on artists' texts dedicated to new functions and practices for art in society. The title *Control* manifests the departure from the editor's traditional role and promotes self-empowerment. Instead of being passive consumers, the readers can take control of their surroundings and established social hierarchies. The first edition appeared at the time when Willats was calling himself a "Conceptual Designer" rather than an artist. According to the traditional understanding of art, an artist creates art as an end in itself. Willats, however, opposed this concept by making artworks for recipients and their connections with one another.

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Art Education

Events

Friday, June 7, 2019, 10 am-9 pm, Zurich Art Weekend, free entry
Saturday, June 8, 2019, 10 am-8 pm, Zurich Art Weekend, free entry
Saturday, June 8, 2019, 5-8 pm, Zurich Art Weekend, celebration of the launch of Frieze Magazines summer issue with an Apéro on the terrasse
Sunday, June 9, 2019, 10 am-9 pm, Zurich Art Weekend, free entry
Monday, June 10, 2019, 10 am-6 pm, Zurich Art Weekend, free entry
Saturday, June 22, 2019, 7 pm-4 am, Artsnext-Festival with concerts, guided tours, festival shows and party
Monday, 15 July, 2019, 2-6 pm, Pro Juventute Summer Holiday Workshop for young people from 13 to 18 years
Monday, 22 July, 2019, 2-6 pm, Pro Juventute Summer Holiday Workshop for young people from 13 to 18 years

Public Guided Tours

Saturday, June 8, 2019, 11 am, public guided tour in German
Sunday, June 9, 2019, 3 pm, public guided tour in English
Thursday, June 27, 2019, 6 pm, public guided tour in German
Sunday, August 18, 2 pm, public guided tour in German

Family Afternoon

Sunday, June 16, 2019, 2-5 pm, family afternoon together with Kunsthalle Zürich
Sunday, July 7, 2019, 2-5 pm, family afternoon

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F +41 44 277 62 86
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