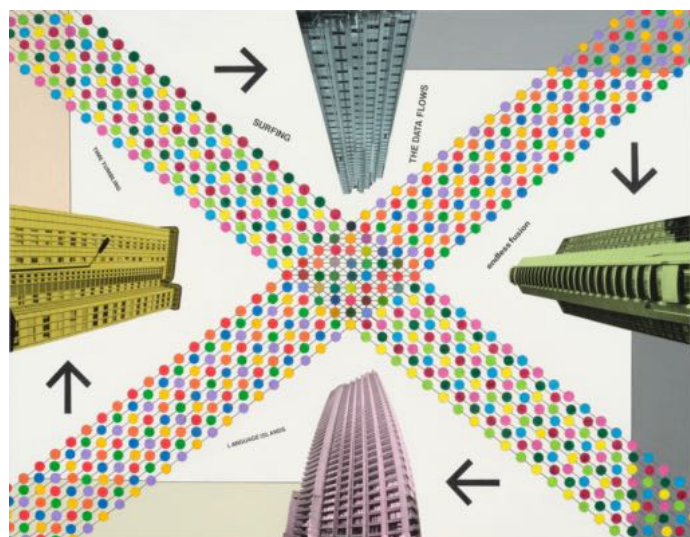


Stephen Willats: *Time Tumbler*

Curated with Jelena Krstic

22 November 2023–13 January 2024

16 Wharf Road, London N1 7RW



Stephen Willats, *Language Islands*, 2021
Photographic prints, photographic dye, acrylic paint, ink,
pencil
81.5 x 105 cm
32 1/8 x 41 3/8 in
© Stephen Willats
Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Victoria Miro is delighted to present an exhibition by pioneering British conceptual artist Stephen Willats on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. Bringing together new works and seminal examples from the 1970s, *Time Tumbler*, curated with Jelena Krstic, charts developments in the artist's singular language, reveals the constancy of his vision and celebrates his long-standing relationship with the gallery.

For six decades, Stephen Willats has concentrated on ideas that today are ever-present in contemporary art – participation, communication, social interaction, active spectatorship and self-organisation. He has drawn on sciences such as cybernetics, advertising, artificial intelligence and behavioral theory to develop a multi-media practice grounded in the idea of the artwork as a dynamic, multichannel and social process in time and place, based on the lived experiences of people outside of a traditional art context. Rather than presenting icons of certainty, he creates an environment that stimulates viewers to engage in their own creative process, redefining the relationship between artist and audience, and the social function and agency of art.

In celebration of Willats' eightieth birthday and his long-standing collaboration with the gallery, this exhibition gathers wall works from the 1970s and juxtaposes them with recent works made in the past five years. During the 1970s, Willats conceived an entirely new way for an artist to work in society, creating what he called 'neighborhood projects' in areas of London, Nottingham and Edinburgh with people in their real domestic or work environments that evolved over several weeks and aimed to reveal the diverse and shared stereotypes, perceptions and aspirations of their inhabitants.

The wall works on view – photographic collages which are often multi-panelled – developed from these ephemeral projects and were produced with the portrait subjects over weeks of interviews, tape recording and photography. Willats' approach challenged the accepted view of artworks on a gallery wall; presented sequentially, his wall works often pose a series of prompts, asking the viewer to consider their own perceptions and responses as they move physically and cognitively along the panels. Functioning as a machine learning system, Willats' artwork is an operational model both constructed by and triggering social interaction, and a conceptual model symbolising a social state and the fluctuating nature of real social structures.

Recent works develop the time-based, social and feedback processes underlying the production and interactivity of the 1970s works. The *Time Tumbler* (2019–2022) series, after which the exhibition is titled, was inspired by a consulting project for the British Museum. For this, Willats conceived of an installation in which visitors would personally define a system of relationships bridging the ancient and current network of associations around an ancient artefact in the museum's collections. Other recent works, including those created with residents living in Somers Town and the Golden Lane Estate in London, reflect on time passing, past and present lives, and aspects of ageing in relation to visibility and self-perception.

The exhibition *Time Tumbler* models our relationship and experience of and with time, its continuity and discontinuity, and the links we create between past and future time that enable our self-determination. Willats shows how people in society, and the work of art itself, are both determined by their specific environment and able to determine it.

Willats' practice piqued the interest of international curators and museum directors in the 1970s and many of the works in this show were exhibited at venues including Whitechapel Gallery, London (1979); Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (1980); National Gallery, Berlin (1980); and Tate Gallery, London (1982). Recent surveys have been organised by the Migros Museum, Zurich (2019), Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporaneo, Mexico City (2014–2015) and Raven Row, London (2014).

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication featuring new writing on the artist by Bronac Ferran, John Kelsey, Jelena Kristic and Stephanie Willats.

About the artist

Stephen Willats was born in 1943 in London, where he continues to live and work. Recent solo institutional exhibitions include *The Social Resource Project for Tennis Clubs*, Nottingham Trent University (2022); *Languages of Dissent* at Migros Museum, Zürich (2019). His work has also recently been featured in *Coded: Art Enters the Computer Age, 1952 – 1982*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2023); *Light Works from the Tate Collection*, Museum of Art Pudong, Shanghai, China; *Rhythm and Geometry, Constructivist Art in Britain since 1951*, Sainsbury Centre, Norwich (2021); *Not Working – Artistic Production and Social Class*, Kunstverein, Munich; *What If ... on Utopia in Art, Architecture and Design*, Neues Museum, Nuremberg; *Objects of Wonder: From Pedestal to Interaction*, Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Denmark; *Bodies – Cities: Collections and Excursions*, Museum der Moderne, Salzburg (2020); Chicago Architecture Biennial (2019–2020), *Still Undead: Popular Culture in Britain Beyond the Bauhaus* at Nottingham Contemporary (2019–2020), *Pushing Paper: Contemporary Drawing from 1970 to Now* at the British Museum (2019–2020), *Objects of Wonder, British Sculpture 1950s–Present*, featuring works from the Tate collection, at the PalaisPopulaire, Berlin (2019).

Previous solo exhibitions held at international institutions include *Control*, Tate Liverpool (2018); *HUMAN RIGHT*, mima, Middlesbrough (2017); *THISWAY*, INDEX, Stockholm (2016); *Man from the 21st Century*, Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City (2014–2015); *Concerning our Present Way of Living*, Whitechapel Gallery, London (2014); *Control: Work 1962-69*, Raven Row, London (2014); *Conscious – Unconscious, In and Out the Reality Check*, Modern Art Oxford, Oxford (2013); Stephen Willats: *Surfing with the Attractor*, South London Gallery, London (2012); *COUNTERCONSCIOUSNESS*, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, Germany (2010); *Assumptions and Presumptions*, Art on the Underground, London (2007); *From my Mind to Your Mind*, Milton Keynes Gallery, (2007); *How the World is and How it could be*, Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Siegen (2006); *Changing Everything*, South London Art Gallery, (1998); *Buildings & People*, Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, (1993); *Meta Filter and Related Works*, Tate Gallery London, (1982); *Concerning Our Present Way of Living*, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, (1980); *4 Inseln, in Berlin*, National Gallery, Berlin, (1980); *Concerning our Present Way of Living*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, (1979).

In 1965 Willats founded the magazine *Control*, which is still in publication.

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