

## Stephen Willats: *Concepts and Construction Works, 1961–1965*

Art Basel OVR: Pioneers

24–27 March 2021



**Stephen Willats**  
*Architectural Exercise No. 1, 1961*  
Oil on canvas  
50.5 x 40.5 cm  
19 7/8 x 16 in  
© Stephen Willats, courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

**Victoria Miro is delighted to participate in Art Basel OVR: Pioneers with a focused selection of important works from the early 1960s by Stephen Willats. Works on view, which include paintings from the period of Willats' first solo exhibition in 1964 and a number of *Area Development Drawings*, completed while he took desk space at a progressive advertising agency, reveal an early interest in ideas around social engagement and active spectatorship that remain hallmarks of the artist's radical practice to this day.**

'People were in communication with each other that weren't in communication before. There was a moment when everyone was excited about everybody else.' – Stephen Willats

For six decades, Stephen Willats (born in London in 1943) has concentrated on ideas that today are ever-present in contemporary art: communication, social engagement, active spectatorship and self-organisation, and has initiated many seminal multi-media art projects. He has situated his pioneering practice at the intersection between art and other disciplines such as cybernetics – the hybrid post-war science of communication – advertising, systems research, learning theory, communications theory and computer technology. In so doing, he has constructed and developed a collaborative, interactive and participatory practice grounded in the variables of social relationships, settings and physical realities. Rather than presenting visitors with icons of certainty he creates a random, complex environment which stimulates visitors to engage in their own creative process.

The conceptual underpinning of these early works lies in Willats' interest in the broad tradition of constructivism to which he had first been exposed between 1958 and 1961 when working as a gallery assistant at the Drian Galleries, London. At the Drian, Willats was introduced to international avant-gardes and met and helped to organise exhibitions by artists including the constructivists Yaacov Agam and Gyula Kosice. Of particular influence was the exhibition *Construction: England: 1959–60* held at the gallery in January 1961, which introduced Willats to English constructivists including Stephen Gilbert and Kenneth and Mary Martin, as well as other artists involved in education, social constructivism and socialism, and helped to ground his move away from the idea, and modernist ideal, of the art object towards a wider consideration of its social role. Invisiting at these important though often sparsely attended exhibitions, Willats began to read books on philosophy by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Marshall McLuhan, among others, and to create his own notebooks in which he considered the role and meaning of art and how artists could connect.

In 1960, Willats also began working part time at the New Vision Centre (NVC) in Marble Arch, which showed experimental European work by, for example Piero Manzoni and the Zero group, as well as abstract painting by a broad range of international artists. In 1962, Willats started to attend the Groundcourse – a radical and influential experiment in art education at Ealing Art College which included exercises in which social processes were privileged over physical constructions, and flows of information took precedence over static models. In tandem, reading philosophy and theories including the idea of the random variable, derived from the mathematical model of uncertainty (which was to influence much of his kinetic work from the period), he established the core principle of his work; that the artwork is activated through the dynamic between itself and each viewer, or participant, and that this experience is different for every individual.

This half-decade period, in which Willats studied subjects including semiology, language codes and behaviourism, had studio visits with RD Laing and Edward de Bono, among many other notable figures, became a progressive educator himself and even took desk space in an advertising agency, today seems almost mythical in its optimistic embrace of the new and cross-pollination of ideas from the worlds of art, science and technology. There was intensive discussion around the role of the artist, what art could – should – be and its function in society. As Willats says, 'People were in communication with each other that weren't in communication before. There was a moment when everyone was excited about everybody else.'

### **About the artist**

Stephen Willats was born in 1943 in London, where he continues to live and work. Recent solo institutional exhibitions include *Languages of Dissent* at Migros Museum, Zürich (2019). His work has also recently been featured in the 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).

**Art Basel OVR: Pioneers is dedicated to artists who have broken new aesthetic, conceptual, or socio-political ground. Victoria Miro's presentation of works by Stephen Willats is also available to view on Vortic, the leading virtual and augmented reality platform for the art world.**

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