

In his opening address to the symposium *Art Creating Society* at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford in 1990, Stephen Willats compelled participants and the audience to contribute their viewpoints on the development of a new vision for art, one that extends its social meaning beyond the institutional territory to which it has traditionally been confined.¹ This statement is an example of his pronounced intention to have his artworks intervene into the functioning of society at large, developing models that provide both critical outlooks and promising perspectives. Willats' approach is connected to the «interactive communication networks» he creates in contemporary art. He also creates a network between artists and others through the magazine *Control* he has been publishing since 1969. The magazine's title should be read in the sense of «agency» and «interaction» and not in the authoritarian sense beloved of the critics of cybernetics, as historians like Andrew Pickering pointed out.²

The magazine is dedicated to the «explanation of art practice between artists.»³ To Willats, a debate on art between artists is not only key for the development of individual art practices, but also for the creation of networks that facilitate new paradigms. The explanation facilitates possible exchanges, more complexity — it maps out intent. This mapping of intent is a way to overcome the discrepancy between the manifestation of art practice and the intention of the artist. For Willats, this is necessary for intervening into existing normative infrastructures. The goal is new frameworks for perception and understanding, and so these need origination, explanation and mapping out, defining. «Explanation» to Willats is «counter-consciousness, a kind of underground subversive activity between small groups of artists.»⁴

In the 1960s, many artists founded magazines that not only positioned their works in artistic discourses, but also tried out new ways of co-involving art and critique, making connections with other socialities and

movements via their journals. These magazines acted as agents transforming artistic production, reception and context. Having been sites for the reproduction of texts and images, such magazines became sites of production for thought and action. Often these magazines would challenge the established institutions of the art world, and call attention to inequalities. Not only did they create alternative content, but they were able to influence relationships and meaning in the art field and beyond, to create different socialities.

The *Modelling Book* creates a sociality of the artwork. By asking people to react to questions, diagrams, and images, the book turns the artwork into a tool that creates a social space, a space of self-reflection, a space of inquiry. Not only do participants participate in the artwork, but they define the very conditions in which art is presented and distributed. The books have a modelling function for art and its institutions, or better, for the very institution of art itself — a lived alternative to existing contexts, reception modes, and communications. Art becomes its own instituting force, art becomes an alternative that manages to embrace the idea of cultures that are circumscribed by interaction and communication.

The 1960s were a time in which artists conceived of reception as a form of production, of perception as a form of creation. In our times of institutionally inscribed cognitive capitalism, such projected emancipatory narratives have gone dystopian. Art and mainstream cultures are now those in which «participation [has become] an imperative, joining a principle, and self-activation — so as to not completely exclude oneself from social media and self-governing networks — a duty.»⁵ The public is now a potent resource and potential source, a raw material to economize. Art institutions predominantly and primarily create and feed on this kind of public engagement logics, and the primacy of interaction and communication. It is not always an engagement that is based on a community

practice created and owned by those involved and interacting. Revisiting Willats' *Modelling Books* help us to think how these forms of «engagement» have evolved and therefore how they might have become or could be otherwise.

In «The Potential of the Participatory,» her contribution for this publication, art historian Elsa Himmer discusses Willats' understanding of art as communication, and his use of the *Modelling Book* in the *West London Social Resource Project* (1972–73) against the backdrop of current debates on participation. Willats' own reflections on his book projects, which he considers as artistic tools for the conversion of audiences into active participants, gain currency in the context of discussions on participation. This publication reprints his key essay «The Book as Interactive Tool. Modelling Book» (1975) where he outlines an interactive approach that avoids the demand to respond and redefines the artwork as a network of relationships between artists, artworks, audiences, and society, framed by participatory interaction.

A series of Willats' works from the 1990s called *Mosaics* form the core of this publication. These *Mosaics* use *Modelling Books* to put contributions by audience-participants center stage, arranging them in ways that create new patterns. Over a period of four years, Willats did six *Mosaics* titled *Multi-Storey Mosaic* (1990), *Book Mosaic* (1990), *People Mosaic* (1991), *Living Mosaic* (1991), *Tower Mosaic* (1991), *Living Mosaic* (1991), *People Mosaic* (1991) *Book Mosaic* (1991), and *Museum Mosaic* (1994).

In the *Mosaics* series Willats' *Modelling Books* activate their subject matter, producing juxtapositions of visual and publishing practices that are hopeful in their potential to allow for us to rethink existing structures. As such, these visual and mental models are invitations to alternate systematicities, they are exercises — technologies even — for diagrammatic world-making, not representations but tools for thinking new ways of life. Willats invites others into these alternative systematicities. Willats impels an age-old, almost alchemical mode of knowledge activa-

tion through iconography, publication, annotation and communication. What Willats gives us are «diagram acts,» each with a power to reconfigure «from below,» (so to speak) the lives, worlds, and lifeworlds of those who take up his invitation to interact.

Willats' juxtapositions jump from the page, reconstituting the cognitive institutions, or the instituted cognition, of their audiences. Like the cyberneticians who inspired him, the reconfiguration of life for Willats was to come as the redistribution of such tools, putting the «right technologies» in the hands of the «right people.» Like cybernetician Stafford Beer's famed 1973 Massey lectures «Designing Freedom,» Willats' work avoids succumbing to the various and much-cited military-industrial genetic fallacies, instead intending to create open, associative forums for the use of established or even «establishment» tools. Willats diagrammatic collages are invitation and inquiry technologies, technologies for instituting new thought (he might say «cognition»), new practices that put the power of cybernetic modelling and control, stability and resilience into the hands of people, collectives, and ad-hoc cooperatives developed through the format of an exhibition. With these tools come an invitation to seek out new ways of life; ways of responding to perceived or received modes of control that are less hierarchical, oppressive, or overly abstract. Willats inverts the dominator culture of cybernetics and its canonical histories, while nonetheless employing its tropes, aesthetics and frameworks.

«What I felt was interesting was to take people's expectations of what they want to find in the museum and turn them around, turn that on its head. Instead of them expecting a passive situation with authoritative works of art, they actually become engaged in a mutual social interaction.»⁶

Willats speaks of this inversion as an inclusion, bringing the social models or concerns of people and communities outside of cultural institutions inside, and vice versa. The diagrammatic juxtapositions he uses to enact and energize these relations and responses shape encounters that attempts to live out a «count-

er-consciousness,» against a normative, deterministic, or conformist shaping of institutions, cognitive and otherwise.

Willats' «Working with Life and Institutions,» published in 1981, casts institutions such as museums as spaces that maintain social hierarchies, vested in objects and potential spaces for experimenting with and thinking new ways of life. «Friendship as a Way of Life,» Michel Foucault's 1981 interview with the French magazine *Le Gai Pied*, describes a similar possibility of re-inventing a spectrum of yet formless relationships.⁷ Both Willats and Foucault describe a restructuring of modes of relation that are necessarily counter-normative, against a backdrop of conservative, traditional social and political institutions. Foucault seeks relationships and modes of living in which relations are unreadable, un-productive, and up for re-invention, existing as the radical possibility of friendship. Willats likewise searches for the ungovernable within systems relations, practices of participation and stimulus-response, within the overarching governmentality of housing project and institutional museum sites. For both the expectation of conformist behavior is likewise «turned on its head.»

What do models model? What do diagrams diagram? When taken somehow *too seriously*, the systems and rubrics of cyberneticians are constraining and limiting, bordering at times on technocentric industrial productivism, an aesthetic that seems authoritarian, totalitarian or totalising. When taken in as the playful, associative creations of a counter-conscious mind and maker, the diagrammatic, the systemic, the structuralist can be presented, and read anew, as unresolved, unsettled and undetermined. Here we have what Pickering has called the metastable «performative epistemology» of cybernetics and systems thinking, «a vision of knowledge as part of performance rather than as an external controller of it.»⁸ Willats brings to the world his formal invitation sets, these structured enticements as creative calls that provoke participation, but the world will always resist such systematicity.

Nonetheless, Willats' systems are, as he would call them, «distance,» «intimate,» and «projectional» representations that begin a reframing or reshaping of realities, less attempting to contain or control them. If our ways of life become destabilized or unhinged by the very forces that claim to regulate them, Willats' relational, participatory diagrammatics may seem a less-than-obvious solution space. Yet perhaps these simplifying techniques are precisely what is called for, at the level of personal and individual response — the right tools at the right time in the hands of the right people. Willats deploys systems thinking «from below» that map distances, intimacies, and projections onto the everyday, a world of complex relations. It is world and sense making that tries to re-invent, re-figure and re-index further spectrums of ever formless, relational flows. In place of mass-deployments of these circuits of control «from above,» cybernetic tools become institutive of counter-conformist counter-consciousnesses.

1. Stephen Willats, «Editorial» *Control*, no. 14 (1990), p. 1.

2. Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain* (Chicago, 2010), p. 470.

3. Stephen Willats, «Editorial» *Control* 16 (2001).

4. Stephen Willats, «Editorial» *Control*, no. 16, (2001), p. 1.

5. Eipcp, *After Audience*, Belvedere 21, Vienna, 9 June, 2018, <http://midstream.eipcp.net/after-audience>. (accessed 2 April 2019)

6. Stephen Willats, *Artwork as social model*, (Sheffield, 2012), p. 17A.

7. Michel Foucault, «Friendship as a Way of Life» *Le Gai Pied* (1981).

8. Andrew Pickering, *The Cybernetic Brain*, (Chicago, 2010), p. 25.