

Stephen Willats: Art, Ethnography and Social Change

Two recent exhibitions, one in London, *Street Talk*, the other in Middlesbrough, *Between You and Me*, reveal the breadth as well as the coherence and consistency of Stephen Willats' work, developed over the last 30 years. At the same time the contrast between the white cube space of the Victoria Miro Gallery, in Cork Street, home of London's art scene, and the municipal Middlesbrough Art Gallery, in a city wrestling with the traumatic changes wrought by de-industrialisation and its aftermath, points to the problems faced by artists trying to develop new practices outside traditional relationships and ideology.

Despite the differences in visual appearance between the work in London and Middlesbrough, both exhibitions are framed by a critique of dominant art practice, of the artist as sole producer of the work, and of the artist/spectator relationship. The idea that art is made by a lone genius, a remnant of late 19th century ideology, has retained credence throughout this century. Despite some collaborative projects, many developed by feminist artists in order to consciously undermine the male creator syndrome, both popular mythology and dominant art ideology has maintained this credo.

Willats' work, by contrast, is produced with other people, sometimes in a specific environment inhabited by the participants, as in *The Transformer* in Middlesbrough, sometimes in the broader context of the city, as in the work at Victoria Miro's—Oxford Street and the underground system from Bond Street. While the artist obviously has a conception of what he is trying to accomplish, the role of the collaborators—in choosing specific imagery or objects to photograph, in reinterpreting their environment—powerfully grounds the work in everyday experience. These collaborations with different groups and individuals give each work a strong sense of identity, which no one person—artist or otherwise—could achieve.

Likewise, despite attempts to change the power relations between artist and spectator by Conceptual

of digital technology's ability to offer different, but controlled routes through the material.

This is the second area in which Stephen Willats' work has made inroads into dominant practice and ideas. All his pieces demand an active and broad response. Sometimes this is built into the work, as in *Freezone* shown at the London exhibition. Here the work lies dormant until activated by spectator/participants. Two computer screens, two sets of words as thesaurus and a single tall tower marked with significant sites down Oxford Street, form the quiescent architecture of the work (Fig. 1). It comes to 'life' when two participants, working through the scenes visualised on the screens, try to come to an agreement in describing them, and in so doing, progress down the street from Marble Arch to Oxford Circus. This process is signified by the tower lighting up along the significant places. This is not just the product of two or three controlled possibilities, but a multiplicity of choices, which, as you proceed, tells you something of your own unconscious preconceptions and attitudes to society, as well as those of your partner.

The coherence and consistency of Willats' work is also exemplified by *Freezone*. Its intellectual origins go back to *Meta Filter*, made in 1973-4 and recently bought by the Museum of Modern Art, in Paris. This was an early use of a computer to allow two participants to work through a set of images about people's everyday lives by collaborative agreement. But the differences between this piece of over 20 years ago and today's *Freezone* (apart from the flares of 1973 replaced by today's fashion!), are instructive. While the figures used in *Meta Filter* were models in environments orchestrated and photographed by the artist, the images in *Freezone*, along with sounds of the street and notations of weather conditions etc. were taken by a group of people walking down Oxford Street, each given a brief as to which element of the environment to concentrate on. This greater use of collaborative production gives the piece an identity, a strong sense

of place and time, but without the character of individual expression. For those who took part in the construction of the imagery and notations, the recognition on the computer screen of a footprint on the pavement, the grating round a tree, a bench on which to rest (I was asked to note the ground), is a reminder of how the work was made.

films, bounded by grids and framed by short philosophical statements/questions, both reproduces the experience of commuter journeys in the city— anonymity, crowds, alienation, noise (both aural and visual)—and at the same time provides a way of seeking an understanding of this typical late 20th century experience.

Going Home is characterised by an immediacy, a sense of recognition, a common experience, but in a concentrated form: the angry man glaring at someone's camera contrasts with the general refusal of most to relate to others, characteristic of urban life— young men, older women, children, concentrating on leaving this unpleasant environment to reach the relative calm and safety of home. Simultaneously this concentrated piece of 'life' is questioned by the statement/questions beneath each panel. While not always as clear as they could be, these ask us to think about what all this means: what it means about human relationships, not in the usual form of blood and familial relations, but as groups living in a mass, late capitalist society, after 18 years of Tory rule in which so much, work, leisure, retirement, health, has changed.

The third piece, *In Taking a Walk* is, unlike the other two, without human figure, yet human activity is everywhere. The urban street, shop signs, adverts, pieces of rubbish on the pavement, a scene without any green or natural growth is full of signs of human life, evoking a strong sense of the experience of walking down an empty, rundown city street. Of the three it is perhaps the most evocative, despite the human absence, of late 20th century urban life.

No specific answers are given in any of these works, for Willats' work has never been prescriptive; but it does pose, in its theory and practice, a different kind of society, one in which today's minority, counter-cultural propositions have become the norm, where collaboration has replaced competition, where real democracy is at work, and where art is removed from objecthood to become 'useful'. In this way his work is also about artistic function. What role does art play in the late 20th century and what role could it play in a different, more socially egalitarian society?

In *The Art Museum in Society*, published for the Middlesbrough exhibition, Willats has collected together some of his writings on these issues. The text *Transformers* from 1988 expresses clearly his intentions:

"I consider the act of 'transformation' to be a fundamental creative act, basic to expression and survival....within every person there

lies the transformer and...the initiation of transformations is essential to each individual...expressing their self-organisation, their self identity. But while I can see...the... transformer...latent within everyone, I also recognise its social inhibition—for the repression of self-organisation...is implicit in the norms, rules and conventions of what we are led to call normality."

Willats' work is structured through the potential people have to change the meaning objects carry, a change from expressions of social power by possession to tools of change, through self activity and organisation:

"In the concept of counter consciousness the object's status as an icon is replaced with the percep-



Above: Fig 1
Right: Fig 2

artists of the 1970s, the inequality of this relationship still persists, the active/passive opposition between maker and viewer underpinning much art practice. Even work which opposes this redundant method—for example that which questions gender identity, or racial stereotypes—while challenging the spectator's preconceptions as well as societal norms, rarely activates or proposes a situation in which the spectator becomes participant. Even where this does take place, as in some work produced through computer programmes and digital technology, the interaction is often undermined by the authority of the artist who retains overall control of the technology. The apparent autonomy given to the spectator is not real, but simply a product



of place and time, but without the character of individual expression. For those who took part in the construction of the imagery and notations, the recognition on the computer screen of a footprint on the pavement, the grating round a tree, a bench on which to rest (I was asked to note the ground), is a reminder of how the work was made.

The second piece in the London show, *Going Home*, (Fig. 2) was made by eight people with cine cameras boarding a tube train at Bond Street and recording specific aspects of the journey, such as people and objects, signs in the environment, spaces. Although this is a flat wall-mounted piece of four panels, its construction from a series of snapshots taken from the

Right and far right: *The Transformation: The Book of Questions*

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tion of the object functioning as an agent or tool, that is integral to our relationships, to the making of society. In my work the transformer is presented as a symbolic person for the audience, not just any person, but an actual person who has made transformations from the object-based determinism of our contemporary culture to a counter consciousness of self-organisation based on people....[T]he transformer expresses via those objects a corresponding change in his or her own consciousness, assigning to the object a new, self-given function which is other than its predetermined role."

Questioning the social function of art has been a prevailing concern of Willats' work. His book *Art and Social Function*, of 1977, looked at three projects, including *Meta Filter*, as well as *West London Social Resource Project* and *Edinburgh Project*, both of which developed artwork with groups of people in communities, while his more recent book, *Between Buildings and People*, 1996, pursues the theme of the relationships between people and their environment, showing how people individualise their surroundings, while at the same time being prescribed by them.

Of course the theme of social function is one which has preoccupied 20th century artists, from the Dadaists to today's heirs of that tradition. The history of these debates is well known, from the Berlin Dadaists and Russian Constructivists grappling in revolutionary situations with the question of art for a new society where the working class might rule, to the disputes between Brecht, Benjamin and Lukacs on questions of the appropriate forms of a new proletarian or revolutionary art, to the feminist experiments of the 1970s, and Conceptualists of the same decade: art in the 20th century has been preoccupied with finding a role for itself. Sometimes it has accepted the role designated by capitalism that everything within its grasp become a commodity in a marketplace; at other times art and culture have been able to carve out a temporary hiding place where experiments in prefigurative activities have taken place.

The election of the 'new' Labour Government, while it has inherited not just the economic and social wasteland that is late 20th century Britain, but also much of the Tories' political baggage, has also opened up a space for the question of the role and function of culture in the broadest and art in the narrower sense. Hence some of the questions redolent of the 1970s are again on the agenda. The question of art's function, of spectatorship and audience, of creating a situation for art's production which can avoid the worst excesses of commodification, the appropriate forms and techniques for a late 20th century, computerised and digital culture, all these questions are being asked again, sometimes, unfortunately in ignorance of their history, not just in the 1970s, but in the 1920s and '30s too.

Partly because of this ignorance and partly because of postmodernism's ability to confuse and relativise ideas, (including ignoring history), today's debates on these questions are often frustratingly unclear.

These ideas are also, of course, rather unfashionable. Since the defeats of the 1980s, both in Britain and globally, under Thatcher and Reagan, the 'S' word, as Judith Williamson so aptly put it in *The Guardian* recently, 'Socialism', is unspoken and unspeakable. Yet there is a clear change of mood in Britain, evident in much popular as well as artistic culture, which says that the 'S' word should be heard again, even if New Labour, is not the party to speak it. It also means that the work of an artist like Willats, has come under the spotlight again—though he continued to work on his preoccupying themes throughout the 1980s!

QUESTION 14: THE MEDIA CAFE
SPECULATE ON HOW THE SUBJECT OF THE PICTURE BELOW COULD POSSIBLY TRANSFORM COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PEOPLE ASSOCIATED WITH THE IMAGES ON THE DISPLAY BOARD



"I find the interaction is much more geared through a different route now. Through TV, through the Internet, through computer games. I think face-to-face physical interaction is a bit less prominent."

QUESTION 15: THE MEDIA CAFE
HOW DO YOU THINK THE IMAGE BELOW COULD TRANSFORM THE MESSAGE FROM THE IMAGES ON THE DISPLAY BOARD TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT EXPRESSES WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY. MAKE A PICTURE OF THE RESULT



"It's a little bit like seeing a film in fast forward, where everything's happening very quickly, except it's a stationary film, stationary, fast forward, you've got all these areas of images of different ages, things have been added onto and changed over the years but you're seeing it all in one go, one very quick glimpse."

The work on show in Middlesbrough is more closely linked to his projects developed within specific communities with their residents. Best known are pieces such as *Brentford Towers* 1986, where the residents of the West London tower block revealed the strength of their ideas on how they would like to change their environment, and had in many cases actually done so, despite the authoritarian nature of their surroundings. Although this type of work is associated with council estates and tower-block living, he has in fact worked in a variety of situations, on waste ground such as *The Lurky Place*, in West London, 1981 and *Taking the Short Cut* made in Roydon, Essex, 1994, in residential areas such as *Perivale* in West London, *From a Coded World*, 1977, and both here and in other European cities. But what unites all his work is his refusal to countenance anything but the urban and the everyday.

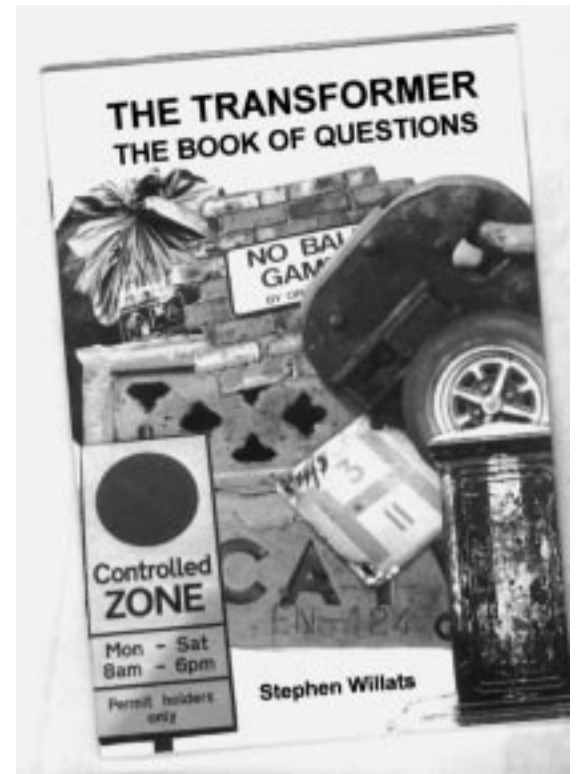
The centrepiece of the Middlesbrough show is 'The Transformer', made specifically for the exhibition and linking together the gallery with sites around it such as a community centre, a library, a cafe. Participants are asked to make a walk around a small, concise area of the city, mostly made up of narrow terraced streets, with a project book, *The Book of Questions*. Constructed from images and words in collaboration with people from the area, it provides a series of photographed objects and signs in the locality—mundane and ordinary things such as a door knocker, a goal post painted roughly on a brick wall—along with short statements and questions. The participant is asked to respond to these images and words on a response sheet. Having completed the circuit, the drawings and texts are brought back to the gallery to be pinned on a noticeboard, thus becoming part of the exhibition, providing examples of others' interpretations and reconstructions of the environment.

There is much in this work, and other pieces in the Middlesbrough show that relates to ethnography and anthropology. In *The Artist as Ethnographer* Hal Foster examines the way in which avant-garde art has increasingly broadened its scope to include such areas under the impact of social movements and cultural theory. Citing civil rights campaigns and feminism as well as the influence of psychoanalysis, and the writings of Gramsci, Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, Said, Spivak and Bhabha, Foster says: "Thus did art pass into the expanded field of culture that anthropology is thought to survey."

In tracing the path taken by some contemporary North American and European art through the field of anthropology, he warns of several pitfalls which are apposite in discussing Willats' work. Foster questions whether perhaps the museum as patron may inoculate itself by incorporating potential criticism of its role into the institution; although at the same time:

"...in order to remap the museum or to reconfigure its audience, [site-specific work] must operate within it."

Foster also warns of the dangers facing artists who seek new ways of relating to spectators/participants. Noting that much work based on aspects of anthropology, suffers from that discipline's imperialist and colo-



nial origins as the study of 'others' (other societies, other cultures, other artifacts, other peoples, 'primitives'), he notes the danger of the artist either standing 'in' the identity of the community or being asked to stand 'for' this identity: "to represent it institutionally." Such an identification is less than useful, but he is even more critical of its opposite: "Far worse ...is a murderous disidentification from the other."

Foster begins the essay with a discussion of Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay *The Artist as Producer*, where he calls on the tendentious artist to go beyond a place "beside the proletariat" which he attacks as "that of a benefactor, an ideological patron", to intervene instead, like a worker, into the means of production, to change the technique of traditional artistic production, to become a revolutionary worker—but against bourgeois culture. This position seeks to overcome the identification warned against by Foster, the artist is not in the same position as the worker, but must develop an equally critical approach to her artistic means of production, while directing her work in the interests of the working class.

Stephen Willats' work goes some way towards this goal identified by Benjamin, although in this period of quiescence, unlike the 1930s when Benjamin was writing, it is necessarily more restricted in its aims. In *The Transformer* the artist does not just "let the community speak for itself." The ideas framing the work, the choice of sites, the imagery, are coordinated, in negotiation, by the artist. These negotiations are multifaceted and include individuals in the area where the project takes place, the gallery and its curators, the city and its elected representatives. But the work is developed with local community involvement and it changes and develops with the responses of participants to the questions asked during the walk.

It also opens up the gallery/museum to useful work. The inaccessible and elitist museum is rejected, while the work done before and during the duration of the project, both by the artist and his collaborators and by the spectator/participant, changes the way those involved see their world.

Finally the most radical aspect of this and much of Willats' other work, is the way that it quietly but consistently asks us to move from observer/spectator to participant, raising our awareness of the way society influences every aspect of our lives—from the macro economic level experienced at work to human relationships at home, from the press and media to the everyday objects we take for granted—all of which express a repressive and authoritarian culture. His work also undermines those twin pillars of refusal to engage with the possibility of change: the totalising and seamless picture of ideology constructed by Althusser in the late 1960s as well as the extreme relativism of most postmodern writings since. For Willats' work is precisely about that, about change.