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The Potential of the Participatory

Stephen Willats' «The Book as Interactive Tool: Modelling Book» (1975)

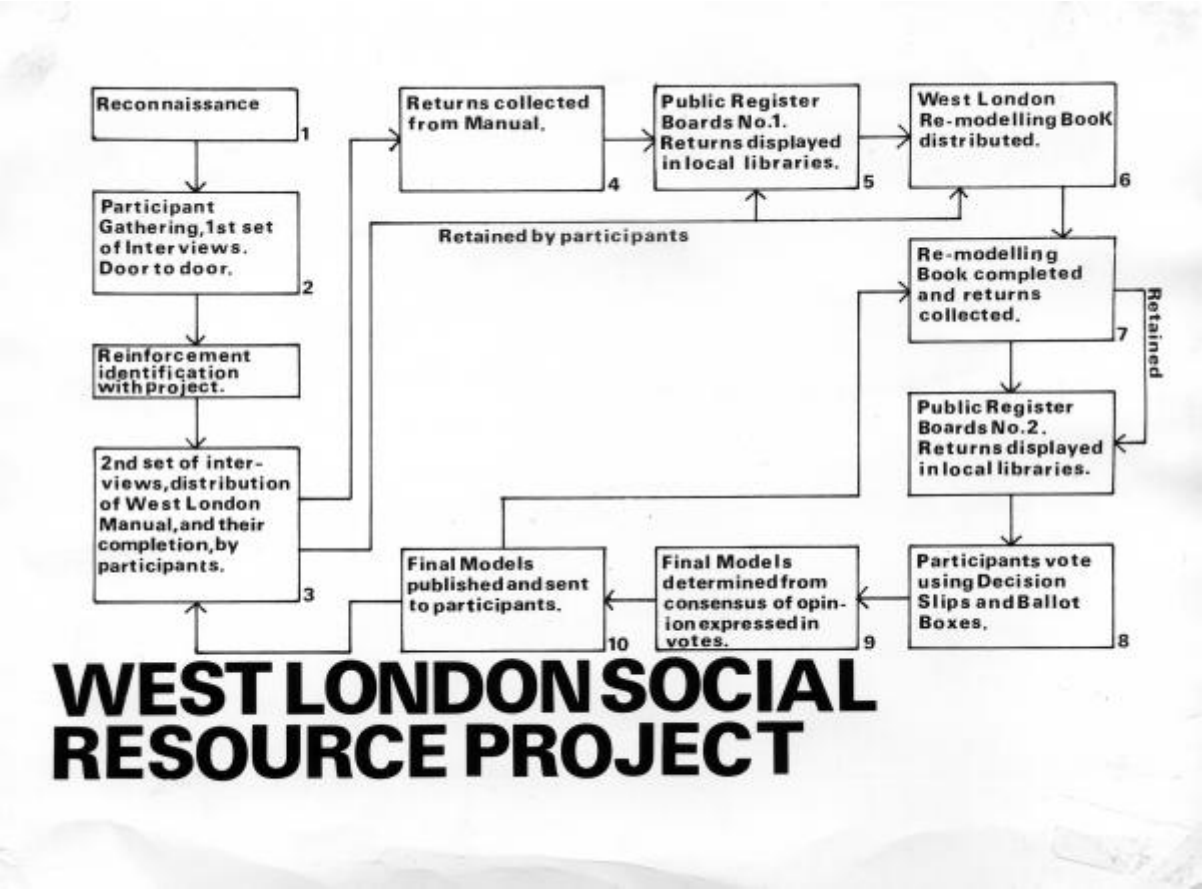
Elsa Himmer

Starting from an understanding of art as a form of communication, British artist Stephen Willats developed an artistic medium with his *Modelling Books* [b-n-l/book-as-interactive-tool/] which redefine the network of relationships between artists, artwork, audience, and society within the framework of participatory actions.



WEST LONDON RE-MODELLING BOOK





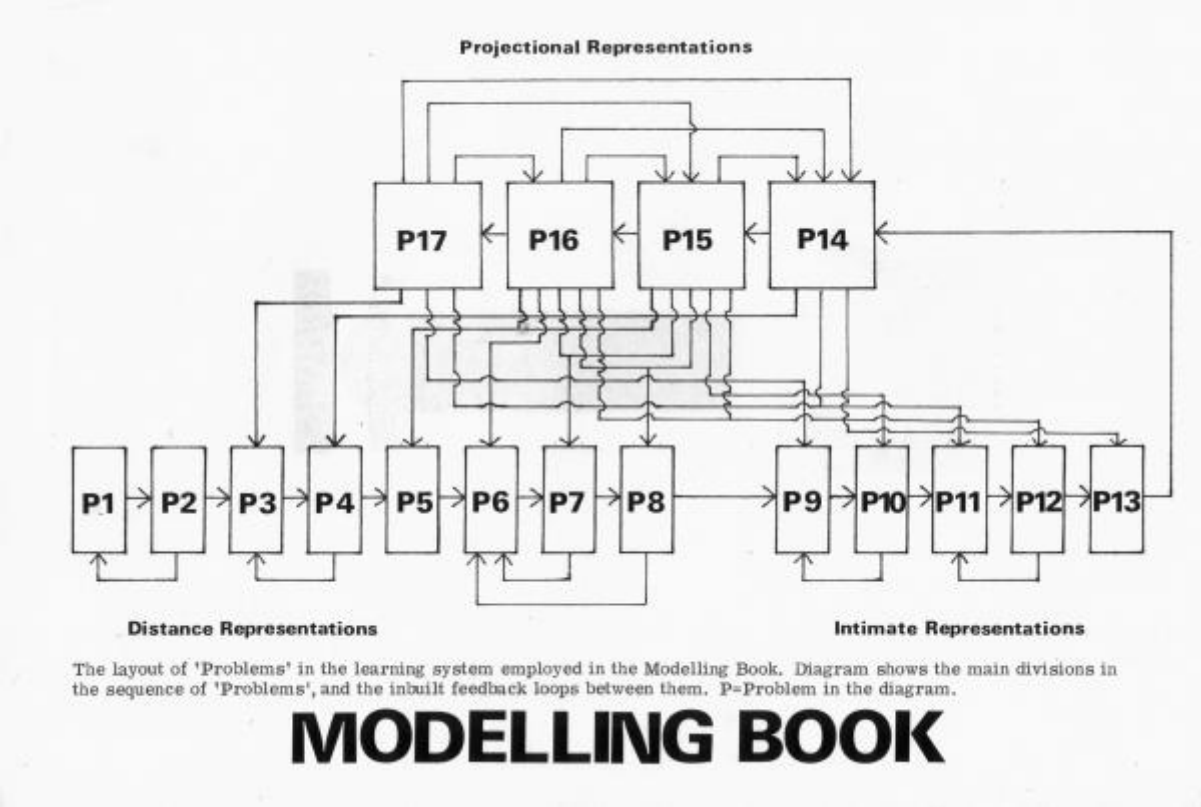
Stephen Willats, *The West London Social Resource Project*, diagram, 1972-73

«Ultimately, I am interested in the idea that reality is our own construction, that we build it and we create the reality we want in our life. There is not only one way of viewing reality.»[1] Influenced by cybernetics and learning theory, Willats is interested in the individual's relationship to his environment. Willats understands his work as a «social process.»[2] The artwork as an object moves into the background, and the focus is on the participation and reactions of the viewer. His works are often created outside of traditional art institutions and seek proximity to a not necessarily art-appreciative audience in residential quarters, bookstores, clubs, and public places.

In his 1975 essay *The Book as Interactive Tool: Modelling Book*, Willats reflects on the necessity of a participatory artistic practice and describes various methods and procedures he has developed to promote processes marked by co-determination. The central theme of the text is Willats' view that the way people process information can never be thought of in universal terms, as it depends on specific social, physical, and normative contexts. Consequently, if art is to reach an audience with just an indirect relation to it, it must intervene in the specific social reality and operate within the respective behavioral routines. It is crucial to Willats that his work not only focus on the lives of individual people but actually have these people actively participate in it. As described in *The Book as Interactive Tool: Modelling Book*, the book is, to Willats, a medium particularly suitable for a participative exchange with a particular context.[3]

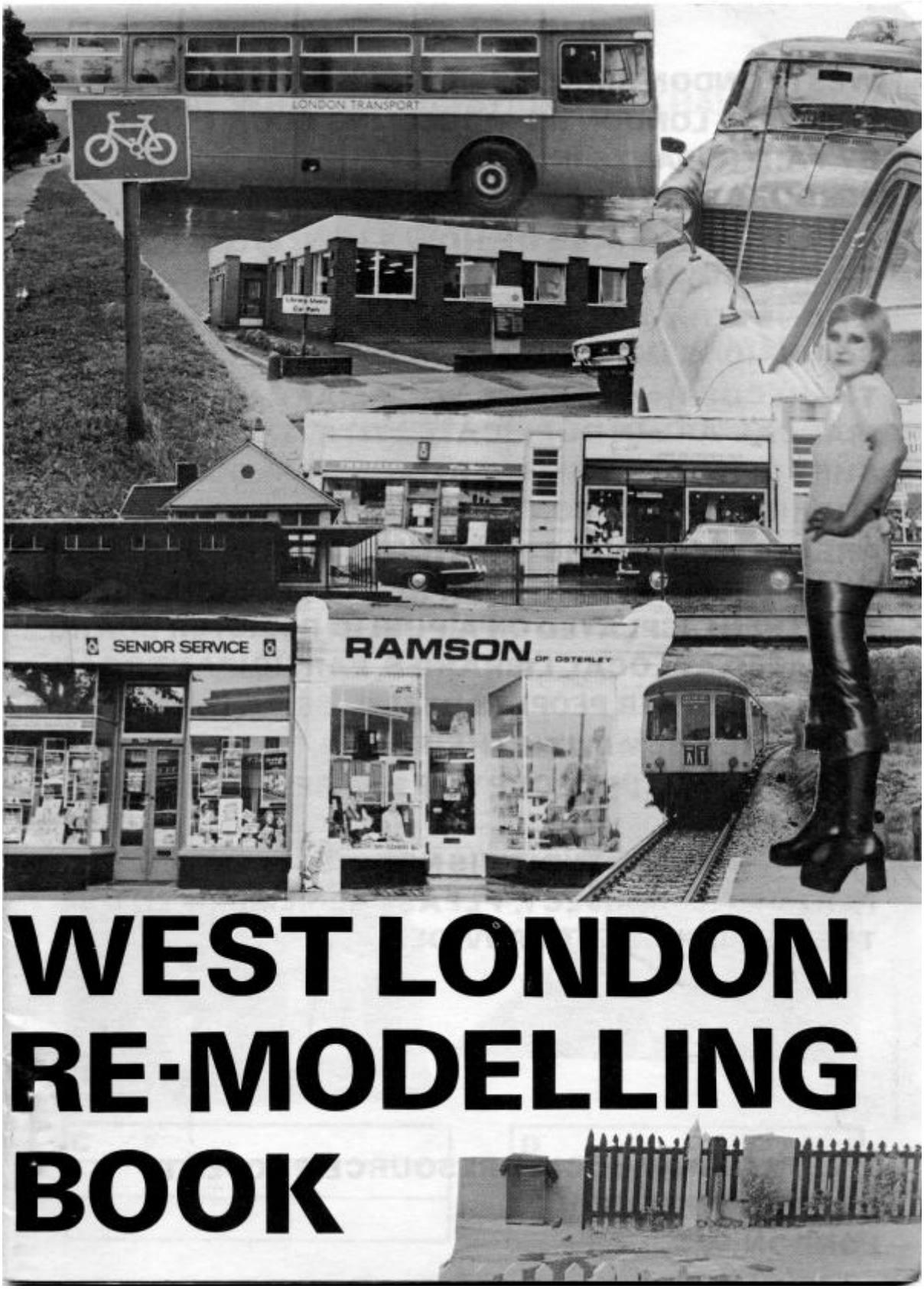
The West London Social Resource Project (1972–73) is an early example of Willats' approach. In four residential areas in West London, residents could volunteer to participate after the project was announced and received a copy of the *West London Manual*. The various *Modelling Books*, each tailored to the project, encourage a discussion of the personal living environment of the respective participants by offering them the opportunity to comment on the situation in their neighborhood. To this end, the *Modelling Books* conceived by Willats

contain various «problems» formulated by the artist, which the participants are invited to consider and work on. These problems are presented as images, diagrams, texts, or a particular question relating to the images. Willats has coordinated the «problems» in such a way that each new problem and its answer relates to the preceding questions. Consequently, a network of feedback loops is built up in the course of the work with the *Modelling Book*. The longer one works with the book, the more complex the formulated problems and the possibilities to work on them.

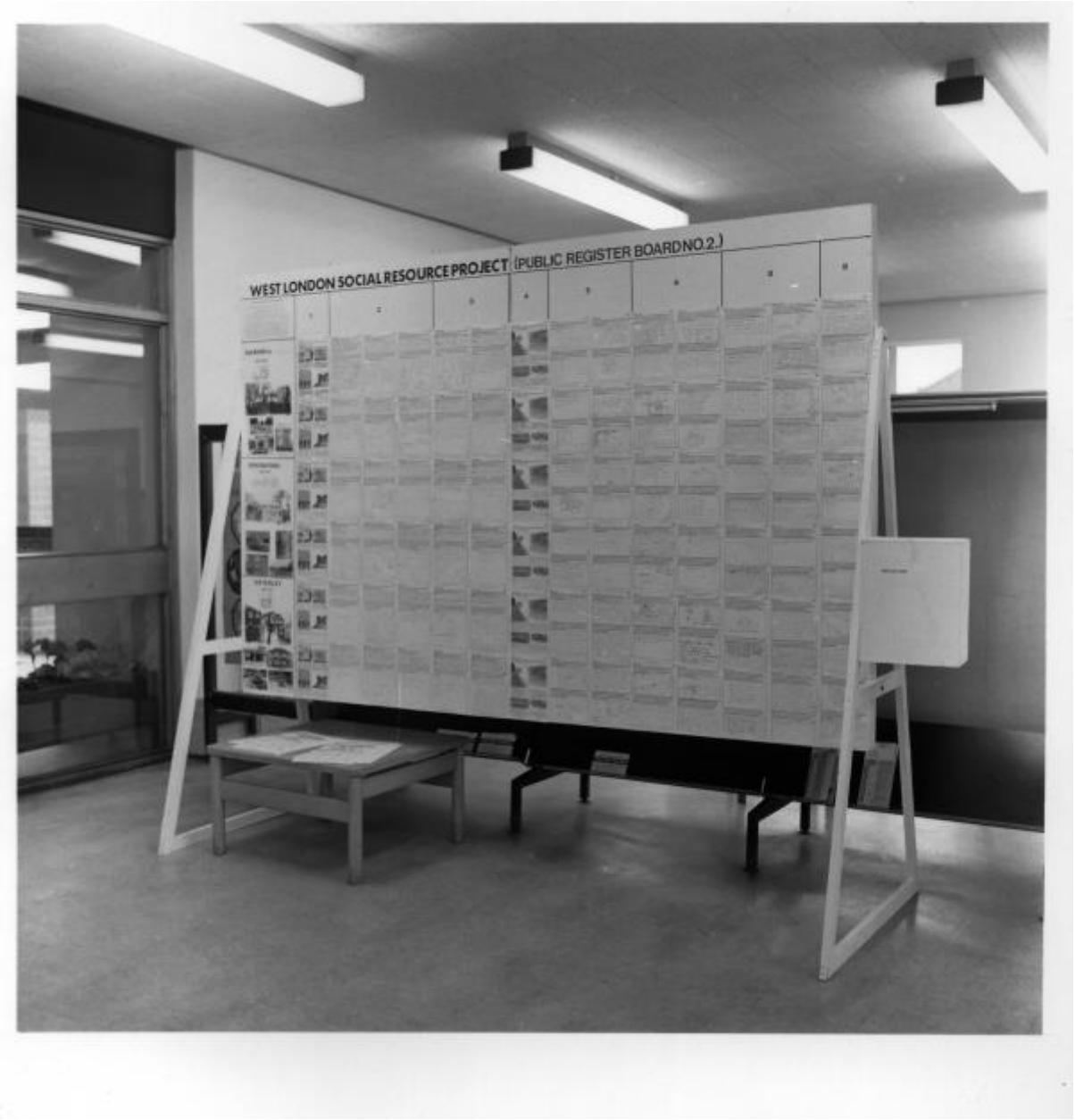


Stephen Willats, *Modelling Book*, 1975

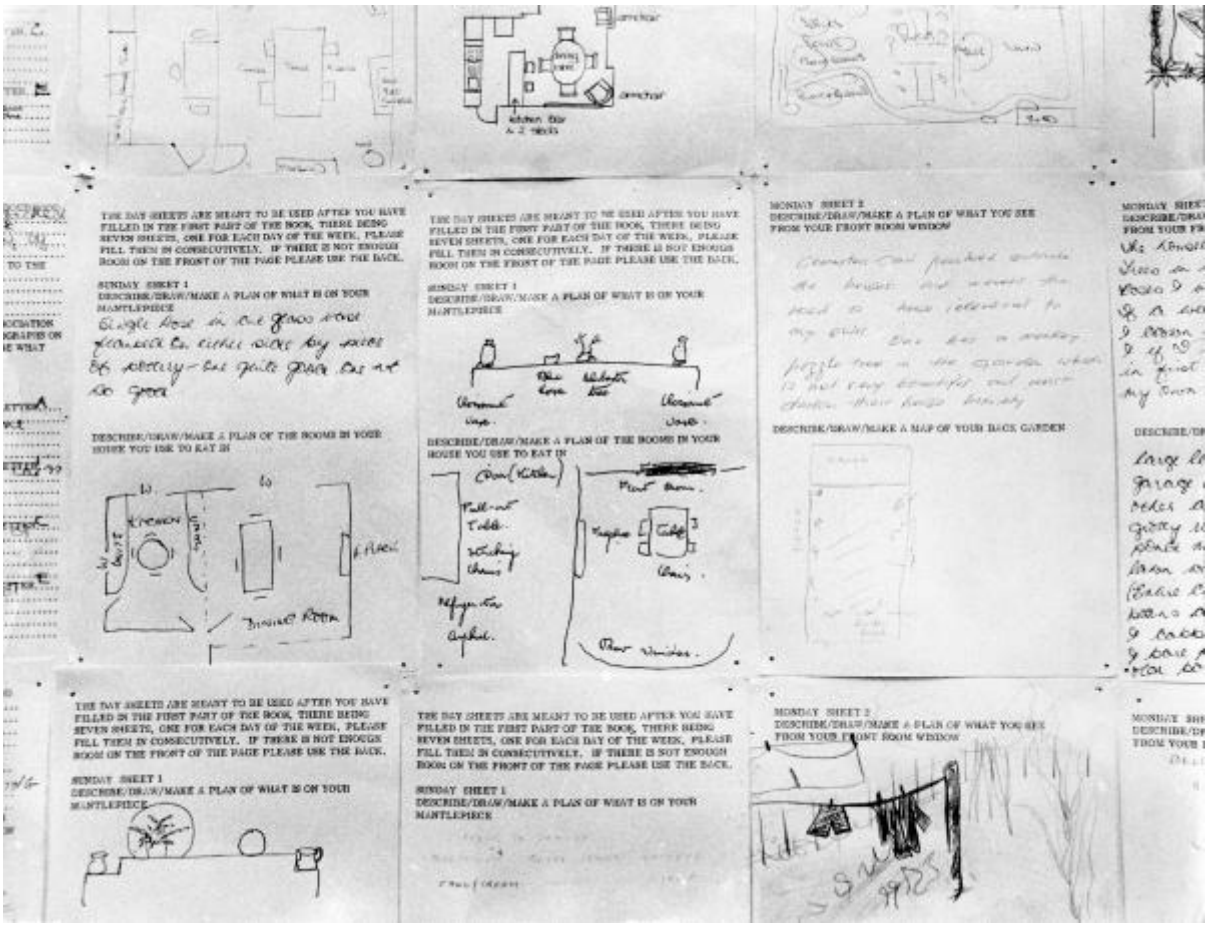
For example, the *West London Manual* (as a *Modelling Book* belonging to *The West London Social Resource Project*) contained a series of references to and illustrations of objects found in the four residential areas linked to the project, to which the project participants could note their associations and feelings. In addition to the *Modelling Book*, those personal remarks were also committed to so-called *Day Sheets*, which were prepared by Willats as sections for further discussion. In the public libraries of the respective residential quarters, the various sheets were displayed for all residents to view. In a next step, the participants received another *Modelling Book*, the *West London Re-Modelling Book*, which asked what should be changed in their homes and neighborhoods. The collected suggestions for changes were voted on and the results were collected in a book which the participants could use to compare their visions and ideas for communal living with those of their fellow participants.[4] In this way, the *Modelling Book* may inspire participants to take a closer look at their environment and, in the process, open up opportunities for change, in order to create an environment consistent with their visions and needs.



Stephen Willats, *The West London Social Resource Project, West London Re-Modelling Book,* 1972-73



Stephen Willats, *The West London Social Resource Project*, display board, 1972-73



Stephen Willats, *The West London Social Resource Project*, display board (detail), 1972-73

Thus, from Willats' point of view, such processes of inviting people to confront their environment create a different public sphere, a community-oriented public sphere from the bottom up, while at the same time aiming to counter the dominance of a deterministic community. Willats coined the term «counter-consciousness» for this kind of public sphere. The turn towards one's environment stimulated by the *Modelling Books* may serve to create greater awareness of one's social situation and at best case to present creative options.

Willats' practice is based on the work of information theorist Donald M. MacKay who has investigated how mental images and conceptions can become information that can be shared. For MacKay, questions are the expression of an incomplete picture of the world. In answering a question, person A tries to complete the picture of the questioner (person B). This requires person A to arrange his internal representations in a certain way, to externalize this order and to transmit it to person B as ‹information.› If the answer fails to close the ‹gap› of the questioner (person B), further questions and answers follow. An interactive feedback mechanism is developed with the aim of both parties eventually having the same picture. To Willats, the decisive point in this process theorized by MacKay is that, through the very use of *Modelling Books*, the particular internalized orders and ideas become explicit, thus offering an opportunity to revise, rearrange, and reconcile one's attitudes.[5]

Against the background of current political developments, this critical awareness of one's own convictions seems more critical than ever. The public debate and the opinion-forming processes associated with it are increasingly characterized by a violent clash of different attitudes, in which a simple argumentation structure serves merely to (self-)assure one's position and real exchange with one's counterpart is rarely sought. There is often no agreement on the existing dissent. So how can we mediate between people who think differently? How can exchange between interlocutors of different convictions be initiated,

especially if the topics are highly charged emotionally?

With these questions in mind, I would like to argue the case for extending Willats' method of the participative feedback loop from an examination of the specific living environment to a broader exchange between people with different (political) views. The interplay of question and answer presented in the *Modelling Books* offers an opportunity for understanding. The aim, however, does not necessarily have to be the formation of consensus or the utter reconciliation of contrary opinions; instead, I see the productive moment in the very awareness of different opinions and the possibility of understanding the arguments and attitudes of the other without necessarily having to share them. Such dialogues arise from Willats' idea of a counter-consciousness in as much as community is not staged here as conflict-free harmony: the disputes and conflicts that exist within a society are recognized as such. At the same time, such dialogues allow room for maneuver so that there is the possibility of influencing each other's views and behaviors through targeted argumentation. A sense of community can arise that, rather than being composed of unalterable convictions and conventions, is subject to permanent change shaped by different voices. If, in Willats' terms, people are invited by such a situation not only to watch but to actively participate, then they can see themselves as part of something that is not a self-contained whole. At the same time, there obviously is individual maneuvering room which manifests itself as a fundamental possibility to influence our environment. Such a practice is decidedly different from the use of participation as participation for participation's sake, which is widespread in many social areas.[6] Unlike interactive offers which invite viewers to engage in certain activities within an artistically defined framework of action and focus the (biosocial) roles of the participants as (theatrical) staging, the participatory should do more than turn participants into extras and promote, as Willats also argues, an «increased perception and increased awareness» on the part of the audience.[7]

[1] See Stephen Willats, Context, http://stephenwillats.com/context/ (accessed December 8, 2018).

[2] See Anja Casser, Philipp Ziegler, «Preface,» in Anja Casser, Philipp Ziegler (eds.), Stephen Willats. Art, Society, Feedback (Nuremberg, 2010), p.12.

[3] See Stephen Willats, The Book as Interactive Tool (1975), https://brand-new-life.org/b-n-l/book-as-interactive-tool/ (accessed December 9, 2018).

[4] Stephen Willats, The West London Social Resource Project, 1972–73, http://stephenwillats.com/work/west-london-social-resource-project/ (accessed December 9, 2018).

[5] See Willats, The Book as Interactive Tool (1975).

[6] Cf. Anja Piontek, Museum und Partizipation. Theorie und Praxis kooperativer Ausstellungsprojekte und Beteiligungsangebote (Bielefeld, 2017), pp.14ff.

[7] Elisabeth Fritz, Authentizität, Partizipation, Spektakel (Cologne, 2014), p. 28. The former understanding of participation will persist if participation is refused. The decision to not want to be part of the discussion can be understood in the same way, though in some circumstances it may fuel the dialogue of the other participants.

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Elsa Himmer is an art historian and curator with a research focus on contemporary and medieval art. In addition to her work as an assistant curator at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich, she is currently studying art history and visual theory at the University of Basel. Previously, she studied art history at the University of Hamburg, where she worked as a research assistant. She has also worked at the Bucerius Kunstforum and the art education department of the Kunsthalle Hamburg.

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