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Stephen Willats
Silent Influencer

Opening 19 May 2026
Exhibition 20 May - 26 June

'My works do not tell you how to think; they are conceived of as a tool for formulating your own vision of your relationship with other people and with society. The outcome I want is for the work to encourage lateral thinking on the part of the viewer and to make new connections with the world around them.'

— Stephen Willats

Charim Galerie is pleased to present 'Silent Influencer', the second solo exhibition of work by Stephen Willats at the gallery, following 'Transition – Transform' (2024). Born in London in 1943, over the past six decades Willats has developed an international practice in conceptual art — one formed at the intersection of cybernetics, systems theory, and communication, and grounded in the conviction that art is a process through which people might come to perceive, and transform, the social world they inhabit. Resisting the inherited determinism of object-based art, Willats developed a practice that takes the 'fabric of society' as both its subject and its site of operation — consistently shifting emphasis from the artwork as a closed statement toward the artwork as an open social structure that positions the viewer as an active participant in the production of meaning.

'Silent Influencer' brings together work from the past decade, tracing Willats' continued focus into the mechanisms of social conditioning — and into the possibilities of counter-consciousness: the capacity of individuals to perceive, and reorganise, the structures that shape them. The title names something the artist has long sought to make visible: the ambient, largely unacknowledged systems — of consumer culture, built architecture, behavioural convention — that continuously act upon individuals below the threshold of conscious awareness. Across photographic and diagrammatic works alike, image and text function as signifiers, related through arrows, data streams, Letraset annotations, and coloured dots that refuse singular reading and demand active navigation. As critic Mark Prince has observed, 'Willats has always been as much a romantic artist as an autodidact sociologist/inventor' — the subjectivity of empirical representation is itself his subject, held within a formal language of striking precision.

A persistent preoccupation in Willats' practice is with individuals within the urban community — the person whose inner life, social position, and negotiated reality remain invisible to the systems that surround them. Since the 1960s he has embedded himself within particular neighbourhoods in London and other cities in Europe and USA, using photography as a tool for mapping the hidden dynamics of collective life from within. ***Who Can Keep a Secret*** (2015), a four-panel work incorporating photographs of people connected by arrows, and DVD film, asks the viewer to consider what each individual within a community might choose to disclose — and what they withhold. ***A Portrait of a Society in Transit*** (2020) places colour photographs of people moving through city streets within a schematic diagram, connected by arrows that suggest the full range of possible relationships between them —

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strangers, neighbours, passersby, each caught in motion and bound by the same invisible web of social forces.

His more abstracted, purely diagrammatic works move toward the universal, proposing models of how information, consciousness, and social life might be otherwise organised. The **Omni Directional Search Engine** series (2018–19), four works executed in gouache and pencil on paper at near-square, monumental scale, strips the compositional field back to pure colour, shape and line: each drawing organised around a dominant circular form from which concentric, vibrational pulses radiate outward simultaneously in all directions, modelling a search with no predetermined destination. The brightly coloured palette, encompassing the full spectrum within a single drawing, gives the works their characteristic sense of expansive, non-hierarchical energy. Two works from 2021, **At the Crossroads** and **The Reconnection**, bring this diagrammatic language into relationship with photography: **At the Crossroads** arranges flowing, interconnected coloured dots into a large X of crossed data streams, images of monolithic city architecture forming, in John Kelsey's words, 'an archaeological layer representing a time when social life was still contained by brute urban planning', while **The Reconnection** places two parallel data streams with a time tumbler between the isolated flows — the structure of disconnection, and the possibility of its reversal.

The watercolour and ink works **Time Box Elevator** (2019), **Time Tumbler - Re-mixing the Fragments** (2020), and **A Sequence of Time Boxes** (2021) emerged from a commission Willats developed for the British Museum in 2020, in which visitors would personally define networks of association between ancient artefacts and their present-day resonances — an attempt to liberate objects from what he saw as the museum's function as a 'time box': an institutional container that traps things within fixed historical meanings, cut off from the convolutions of everyday life. Though the project was never realised, it crystallised his understanding of time as relative and non-linear — 'there is no time; what we call time is movement' — and generated a body of drawings in which fragments of the everyday are perpetually reorganised and recombined across temporal contexts.

In the final room of the gallery, **Cybernetic Still Life** (2009/2013/2019/2026) unfolds as an immersive environment in which buildings and objects coalesce into an ever-evolving network of relationships. Combining wall drawings, sculptural elements, and film works, the installation draws viewers into the artist's reflections on the social lives and typologies of objects. First conceived at the Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris; a second time at the Annie Gentils Gallery, Antwerp; and subsequently expanded for a third presentation at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, this latest iteration extends Willats' ongoing exploration of social systems, perception, and communication. It reimagines the still life tradition as something fluid, dynamic, and animate.

Willats' most recent series, **The Silent Influencer** (2025), takes London's financial district as a paradigmatic site of invisible authority — not only its corporate architecture but the social codes, unspoken hierarchies, and patterns of behaviour the environment produces in those who inhabit it. Through photographic fragments of the district's streets, buildings, and figures, held within diagrammatic structures and overlaid with Letraset text and arrows, Willats traces the subliminal feedback loops between space, people, and economic power.

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These works speak to the continuing vitality of a practice that has spent six decades making visible the forces that prefer to remain unseen — the silent conditioning of architecture, consumerism, and networked information that shapes who we think we are and how we relate to one another. In an era of algorithmic mediation and pervasive behavioural influence, the questions Willats has always posed are more structurally embedded in daily life than ever, and more in need of the kind of lateral, participatory thinking his art has always both practised and demanded.

Stephen Willats' recent institutional exhibitions include: *Wohnkomplex: Kunst und Leben in Plattenbau*, Das Minsk Kunsthhaus, Potsdam (2026); *What does he want to get at/ Where does he want to go*, National Portrait Gallery, London (2025); *Leigh Bowery!*, Tate Modern (2025); *Echos du passé, promesses du futur*, Univers Programmés, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon, France (2025); *Electric Dreams, Art Before the Internet*, Tate, London (2024) among others.

Selected solo exhibitions include: *Time Tumbler*, Victoria Miro, London (2023); *The Social Resource Project for Tennis Clubs*, Bonington Gallery, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham (2022); *Languages of Dissent*, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich (2019); *Control*, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool (2018); *Human Right*, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, Middlesbrough (2017); *THISWAY – Stephen Willats*, Index, Stockholm (2016); *Man from the 21st Century*, Museo Tamayo, Mexico City (2015); *Wie die Welt ist und wie sie sein könnte*, Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, Siegen (2006); and *Meta Filter and Related Works*, Tate Gallery, London (1982); *Concerning Our Present Way of Living*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1979); and *Concerning Our Present Way of Living*, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (1980); *4 Inseln in Berlin*, Secession, Vienna (1981).

His work is held in numerous public collections, including Tate, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; The British Museum, London; National Portrait Gallery, London; Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Kunstmuseum Zürich; Migros Museum, Zürich; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Nationalgalerie, Berlin; and Fonds national d'art contemporain, Paris.