

# Conceptual Art in Britain 1964–1979

12 April – 29 August 2016

## Action Practice Large Print Guide



Please return to exhibition entrance



# Action Practice

By the mid-1970s the changing focus for conceptual art in Britain led to its redefinition through the rest of the decade. Having questioned the material, aesthetic and theoretical condition of the art object, it then addressed the role of art in society by combining theory and practice to carry out a critical, activist agenda. This repurposing of conceptual art was in some ways a return to original principles seeking a re-engagement with the wider world.

Conceptual art's initial concern had been to challenge the validity of a modernist practice that did not look for meaning beyond its own material and aesthetic definitions. One approach had entailed shifting the focus of attention from the art object to its context or siting. The artwork might be conceived as an open-ended project of critical research that could have a constructive or even polemical purpose in society. An important aspect of this shift was the change in character for much of conceptual art whereby the bringing together of theory and practice was achieved through the introduction of subjective experience which acknowledged that 'the personal is political'. This can be recognised especially in works that explicitly addressed socio-political issues from a personal or collaborative perspective.

Wall labels

Clockwise from right of wall text

Mary Kelly born 1941

**Post-Partum Document. Analysed Markings And Diary  
Perspective Schema (Experimentum Mentis III:  
Weaning from the Dyad)**

1975

13 works on paper, graphite, crayon, chalk  
and printed diagrams, mounted on paper

These panels form one section of a larger work that documents the relationship between Mary Kelly and her son over a period of six years. Drawing on contemporary feminist thought, and in particular on psychoanalysis, it explores the contradictions for a woman artist between her creative and procreative roles. The work, says Kelly, traces the differences between 'my lived experience as a mother and my analysis of that experience'. Kelly's indexing of how the mother/child relationship comes to be structured contrasts with the way in which the particular indexing procedures of Art & Language refused to admit any element of subjectivity. Kelly recorded and then reflected on conversations with her son as he began nursery school, before finally allowing him to scribble across her carefully documented texts.

Tate. Purchased 1984. T03925

Margaret Harrison born 1940

## **Homeworkers**

1977

Acrylic paint, printed paper, linen, graphite, woollen scarf, 3 metal brooches, household glove, 29 plastic buttons and wool on canvas

Harrison advocated action and strong political discourse as the only effective means of fighting for workers' and women's rights. She began to research Homeworkers when the Equal Pay Act came into force in the UK in December 1975. Factory owners adapted very quickly to the act, transferring low-paid tasks to night shifts, downgrading certain jobs and forcing many women to labour from their own homes. For two years Harrison worked with the National Campaign for Homeworkers in London and interviewed several pieceworkers such as Mrs McGilvery, who assembled tax forms and whose case study is included on the canvas. Below the words 'women', 'exploitation' and 'discrimination', a row of seven hands symbolise the manual labour involved in piecework.

Tate. Purchased 2011. T13631

Conrad Atkinson born 1940

**Northern Ireland 1968 – May Day 1975**

1975–6

70 photographs, c-print on paper  
and typewritten paper on board

This work was part of a commission by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Irish Congress of Trade Unions for an exhibition to coincide with the May Day celebrations in Belfast in 1975, which was reconfigured when shown in London the following year. Atkinson undertook a period of intense research and from this he selected a sequence of photographs made during his time spent in Belfast – many showing posters or slogans in situ – alongside typewritten texts that communicate three distinct positions: Loyalist, Republican and the British Army. Atkinson is even-handed, giving equal space to each voice. While he presents a formidable quantity of often inflammatory and defiant material, his manner of presentation is straightforward, documentary and non-hierarchical. This approach is central to Atkinson's position as a socialist artist and activist.

Tate. Purchased 2010. T13258

Susan Hiller born 1940

## **Dedicated to the Unknown Artists**

1972–6

305 postcards, sea charts and map mounted on  
14 panels, books, dossiers and exhibition catalogues,  
1 painted wooden book stand and Perspex shelf

This work features over 300 postcards depicting waves crashing onto British shores. They are arranged in categories and typologies discovered, analysed and described by Hiller, who defined her role as 'the curator of an unknown category of miniature artworks'. By making such commonplace objects the subject of a dedicated investigation, she gives the mundane new status. Here romantic seaside imagery collides with a strict conceptual methodology. Hiller said that 'while the charts may look like models of objectivity and the visual images like expressions of subjective internalisations, they lead to a series of paradoxes involving the unexpressed but intended vs. the expressed but unintended.'

Tate. Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund 2012.

T13531

Stephen Willats born 1943

## **The Twin Towers**

1977

Ink and dry transfer lettering on paper

Since 1962, when he attended the Groundcourse at Ealing School of Art, Stephen Willats has used drawing and the construction of diagrams to elaborate and conceptualise the context and purpose behind his work. For the artist, the image of the tower or tower block is a way to express the restrictive environments in which people live. This reality contrasts with the enlightened modernist ideologies on which the ethos of such housing is founded. The drawing shows the same building twice, as an existing reality and as a possible future. The project work **Vertical Living** carried out at Skeffington Court in Hayes in July 1978 developed from this concept frame (material about this project is displayed nearby).

Tate. Purchased 2010. T13340

Stephen Willats born 1943

## **Living with Practical Realities**

1978

Photographs, gelatin silver prints on paper,  
gouache and dry transfer lettering on board

Stephen Willats is interested in the ways in which people construct their world in relation to the social or physical constraints that are put upon them. In this work, Willats explores the physical, social and economic realities of living in a tower block, investigating how buildings can stand as symbols for our culture. Over six months he photographed and interviewed Mrs Moran, an elderly lady who was living alone in the tower block. By giving the viewer an insight into the isolation of living in a tower block, the artist hopes they will look at and understand their own cultural situation. The tower block, Skeffington Court in Hayes, also became the site of Willats's neighbourhood project work **Vertical Living** (material about this project is displayed nearby).

Tate. Purchased 1981. T03296

Victor Burgin born 1941

**Possession**

1976

Duotone lithograph on paper

Possession was originally made for a group exhibition at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh in 1976. The work was then reprinted and 500 copies were fly-posted around the city of Newcastle upon Tyne. The photograph is a stock advertising image, and the layout conforms to an advertising poster in its direct address of marketing rhetoric, as would its context when fly-posted on the streets among other similar posters. Yet its message is not to sell a product but to prompt 'questions about property relationships, sexual relationships that become property relationships' – to encourage the viewer not to be a passive consumer but to generate meanings from the particular tensions engendered by what the juxtaposition of image and text here suggests.

Arts Council Collection, United Kingdom. X56066

Victor Burgin born 1941

## **Lei-Feng**

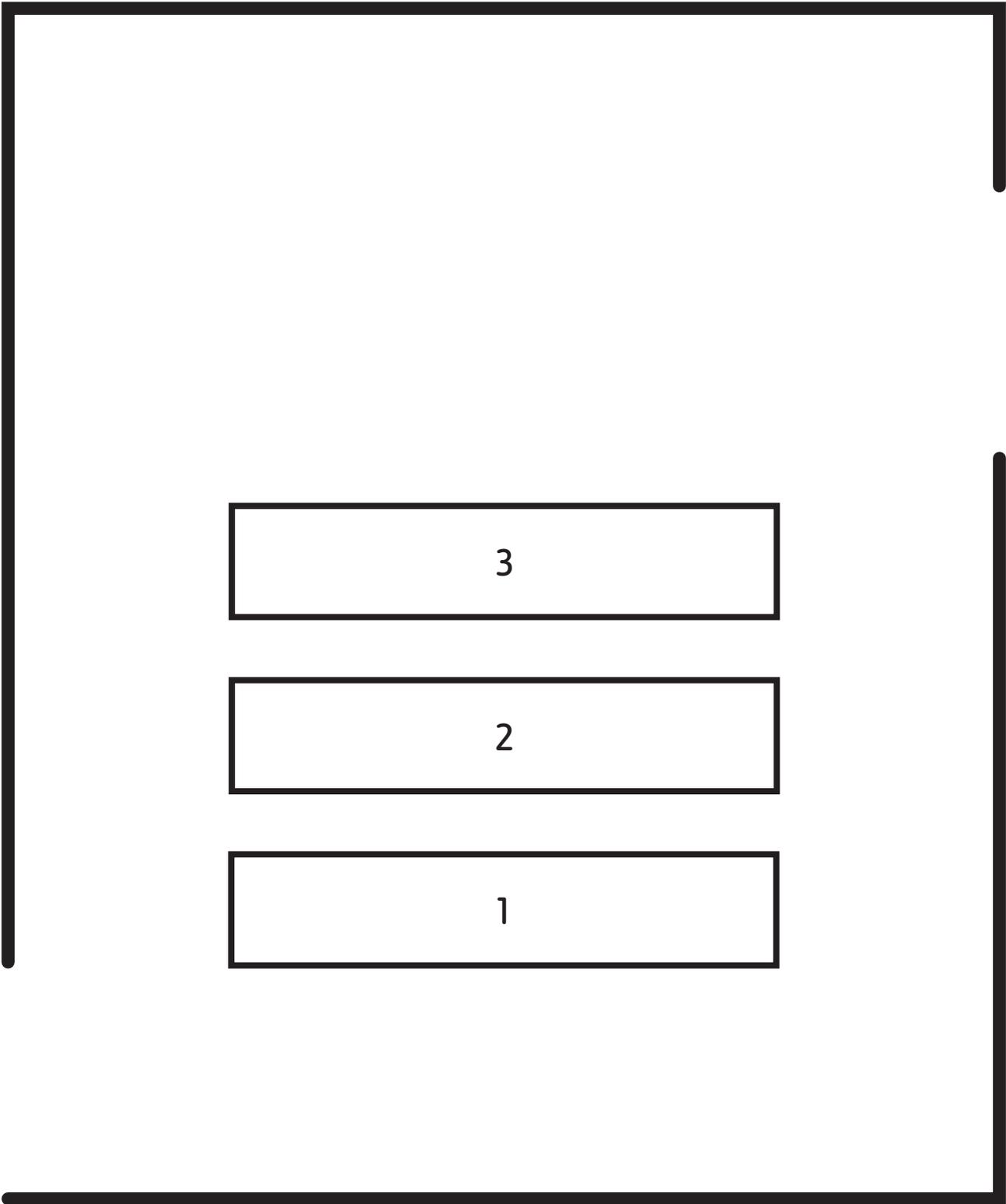
1973–4

9 photographs, gelatin silver print on paper

Advertising images appealed to Victor Burgin because they 'are used... deliberately in the service of ideology'. Each panel of this work shows the same image drawn from an advertisement for Harvey's Bristol Cream, depicting a middle-class English family drinking sherry to celebrate the appearance of their daughter on the cover of Vogue. Burgin uses this to portray an aspect of conventional self-identity for which material success is presented as something to aspire to. He deliberately opposes this view of the world by including captions taken from a Chinese comic book recounting the Maoist parable about the soldier Lei-Feng, whose heroism and personal success were achieved through service to the community rather than in the pursuit of selfish goals. Accompanying the image and caption, there is a commentary written by Burgin about semiotics, analysing how linguistic and pictorial signs function.

Tate. Purchased 1974. P07231

# Showcase labels



## Showcase 1 labels

1

Margaret Harrison, Kay Fido Hunt, Mary Kelly  
**Women & Work, a document on the division  
of labour**

Exhibition catalogue, South London Gallery, London 1975

This installation is one of a number of works from the period (including Mary Kelly's **Post-Partum Document** and Margaret Harrison's *Homeworkers*, both on display in this room) that focused on the position held by women within industrial and domestic labour.

Tate Library. Z05875

2

Margaret Harrison, Alexis Hunter, Mary Kelly

**Women: Sexuality and Socialisation**

Exhibition leaflet, Northern Arts Gallery, Newcastle Upon Tyne 1975

This exhibition was organised by Margaret Harrison and Conrad Atkinson. Harrison showed documentation that would later form the basis of her article 'Notes on Feminist Artists in Britain 1970–77' for the May/June 1977 issue of **Studio International**. Hunter's work examined the role of women as sexual object while Kelly showed the first element of **Post-Partum Document**, which provided an 'analysis of women as domestic labourers'.

Tate Archive, Barbara Reise collection, TGA 786/5/4/26.  
Z05876–7

2

Margaret Harrison, Alexis Hunter, Mary Kelly

**Women: Sexuality and Socialisation**

Exhibition leaflet, Northern Arts Gallery, Newcastle Upon Tyne 1975

This exhibition was organised by Margaret Harrison and Conrad Atkinson. Harrison showed documentation that would later form the basis of her article 'Notes on Feminist Artists in Britain 1970–77' for the May/June 1977 issue of **Studio International**. Hunter's work examined the role of women as sexual object while Kelly showed the first element of **Post-Partum Document**, which provided an 'analysis of women as domestic labourers'.

Tate Archive, Barbara Reise collection, TGA 786/5/4/26.  
Z05876–7

3

Mary Kelly

**'Notes on Reading the Post-Partum Document'**

**Control** magazine No.10 1977, pp. 10-12

Photocopy

Tate Library. Z05878

4

Mary Kelly

**'On Femininity'**

**Control** magazine No.11 1979, pp. 14-15

Photocopy

Tate Library. Z05879

5

Ray Barrie

**'A Question of Paternity'**

**Control** magazine No.11 1979, pp.10-13

Photocopy

These 3 texts by Mary Kelly and Ray Barrie offer the background to and ways of approaching **Post-Partum Document** (one section of which is on display in this room).

Tate Library. Z05880

## Showcase 2 labels

1

### **Letter from Conrad Atkinson 26 January 1972**

This letter outlines the uncertainty Atkinson felt over how his proposal for his exhibition **Strike at Brannans** would be received. He emphasises how he felt his art was premised on a form of criticism of orthodox art practices and then states 'there is no doubt in my mind that there should be a major exhibition around the areas of the social role (or lack of it) and social responsibility of the artist... it would necessarily for me involve a work which lays bare the social structure against which a particular work was shown which same structure would be the artwork as well as the general idea of the show.'

Tate Archive, Institute of Contemporary Arts collection TGA 955/7/2/36. Z05949

2

### **Strike at Brannans**

Press notice, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London 1972

This is the press release for the show that the adjacent letter proposed. The release clearly states Atkinson's aims for an art that is involved in its community, not disconnected, and is an 'effective analytical and critical mechanism', and which realises that 'art is politics (not party politics, but political) and non-political gestures are far rarer than we tend to suppose.' One effect of the show – that detailed a year-long strike at a thermometer factory near Atkinson's home was that workers became unionised at another of Brannans' factories in London.

Tate Archive, Institute of Contemporary Arts collection TGA 955/7/8/35. Z05603

3

Conrad Atkinson

### **'Some comments on approaches to the subjects'**

Typescript text relating to a proposal for the exhibition Work 1974

Tate Archive, Institute of Contemporary Arts collection TGA 955/7/8/84. Z05601

4

Conrad Atkinson

**'Proposal for an exhibition at the ICA provisionally entitled  
"Work"' 1974**

Tate Archive, Institute of Contemporary Arts collection TGA  
955/7/8/84. Z05602

5

Conrad Atkinson

**Work, Wages and Prices**

Press notice, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London 1974

**Work, Wages and Prices** was Atkinson's second exhibition at the ICA which extended from the specific example of the strike at Brannans to a more structured and textured presentation of different types of work as way to 'find a context from which to view art explore its analytical and critical function in society.

Tate Archive, Institute of Contemporary Arts collection TGA  
955/7/8/84. Z05600

6

Victor Burgin

**Untitled text associated with planning for the exhibition**

**'Victor Burgin'**, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London 1976

This text by Burgin offers a clear statement of conceptual art's challenge to modernism and its resulting development into 'a socialist art practice'.

Tate Archive, Institute of Contemporary Arts collection TGA  
955/7/3/9. Z05881

7

**The Newspaper**, April-May 1974

Produced out of the Royal College of Art, this particular issue of **The Newspaper** provided additional information for the conference 'Art/Politics: Theory/Practice', which was held at the college in May 1974. This conference brought together art workers, activists, trade unionists and theorists from the Netherlands and Britain to investigate a range of approaches to the practical application of theory in terms of art's active relationship to class struggle. This front page of **The Newspaper** contains contributions from Mary Kelly and Conrad Atkinson, both of whom were involved with the Artist's Union.

Private Collection. Z05599

## Showcase 3 labels

1

Stephen Willats

**Centre for Behavioural Art 1972**

Subscription Form

Tate Archive, Stephen Willats collection, TGA 20069/1/1.  
Z05733

2

Stephen Willats

**Centre for Behavioural Art 1973**

The Centre for Behavioural Art occupied gallery six of Gallery House through 1972 and 1973, and had been set up by Stephen Willats as a multi-disciplinary site for discussion and investigation into realising, as Willats wrote at the time, 'the relationships (possible and probable) between the social context, the function of the artist and the behaviour of the "audience".' This subscription form and lecture programme list make clear the aspirations Willats had for his art – as is underlined by the title of his March 1973 lecture 'Art Practice and Social Practice'.

Tate Archive, Stephen Willats collection, TGA 20069/1/1.  
Z05732

3

Stephen Willats

**The West London Social Resource Project,  
sheet for Area One 1972**

**The West London Social Resource Project** was one of a sequence of Neighbourhood Projects that Willats carried out between 1971 and 1973. The viewer of these works was a participant, and the work entailed different social groupings living in different areas asking questions about themselves and others so as to stimulate a re-ordering of behaviour between two or more communities. These works exemplified Willats' commitment to siting his work not just outside the art world but as an active participant or trigger for change within the community. Significantly his name did not appear as author or artist, these works were wholly identified by the name of the project. **The West London Social Resource Project** spread across four distinct areas of west London.

4

Stephen Willats

**West London Manual**

(for **The West London Social Resource Project**) 1972

The first step in the project was for participants in each of the four areas designated for the project to articulate their existing perceptions of their social and physical environment using the **West London Manual** – their responses to the questions and prompts within its pages were then displayed on public register boards located in the public library closest to each area.

Private collection. X61901

5

Stephen Willats

**The West London Re Modelling Book**

(for **The West London Social Resource Project**) 1972

The next stage in the Project was to find out, using **The West London Re-Modelling Book**, how the participants might change aspects of their environment according to both individual and group needs. These responses were displayed publically and voted on to find out which constituted the preferred changes. From these projects Willats learned how books such as these could function as a specific tool.

Private collection. X61902

6

Stephen Willats

**The West London Social Resource Project Public Register Board No.1** at Greenford Library 1972

Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

This board displayed response sheets from the **West London Manual**.

Tate Archive, Photography Collection. Z06108

7

Stephen Willats

**The West London Social Resource Project Public Register  
Board No.2 at Osterley Library 1972**

Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper

This board displayed response sheets from **The West London Re-Modelling Book**. Attached to the side is the ballot box for the Decision Slips to be deposited – these expressed people's preferences from the responses exhibited and formed the basis for the final Project Models. In addition to these boards in West London, Willats sited a Public Monitor of the project at Gallery House to show the development of the project in the four project areas in West London as it unfolded.

Tate Archive, Photography Collection. Z05954

8

Stephen Willats

**Meta Filter, The Problem Book 1975**

Tate Archive, Stephen Willats collection TGA 999/6/1. Z05730

**Meta Filter** was the culmination of a number of environmental works by Willats that examine the structuring of behaviour as kinds of learning systems in which the participants are given the opportunity to compete or co-operate with each other. With **Meta Filter** two operators sat at consoles opposite one another and were presented with a series of perceptual problems in the form of questions about how other people's behaviour could be coded. Each operator's response generated a feedback for the other that demanded resolution in how they would respond to the next question they faced. **The Problem Book** was a way for each operator to keep a record of their responses.

9

Stephen Willats

**Meta Filter, A State of Agreement**

Exhibition announcement card, The Gallery 1975

This announcement card publicises the first presentation of **Meta Filter** at The Gallery.

Tate Library. Z05723

10

Stephen Willats

**Meta Filter, A State of Agreement**

Folding card, The Gallery 1975

**Meta Filter** was based on Willats's continued adherence to the idea of social homeostasis, which was realised in this text that accompanied the presentation of **Meta Filter**, as **A State of Agreement** – progression through the problems that the operators were presented with could only be achieved through mutual agreement between them.

Tate Archive, Stephen Willats collection TGA 999/6/1. Z05734

11

Stephen Willats

**Vertical Living, Skeffington Court 1978**

Announcement card

Tate Archive, Stephen Willats collection TGA 8128. Z05724

12

Stephen Willats

**Vertical Living, Participant Project File 1978**

Interior spread

Tate Archive, Stephen Willats collection TGA 8128. Z05725

13

Stephen Willats

**Vertical Living, First Problem Display, Response Sheet**

1978

**Vertical Living** continued Willats's Neighbourhood Projects within the enclosed and defined environment of an individual social housing high rise block in Hayes, Middlesex. Buildings such as this increasingly played a symbolic and polemical role within his work as the setting for an elaborate coding of counter-consciousness and self-organisation.

Tate Archive, Stephen Willats collection TGA 8128. Z05727

14

Stephen Willats

**Vertical Living** 1978

Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, contact sheet

This shows how the seven response boards for the project were set up on different floors of the block. **Vertical Living** was a direct outcome of Willats's collaboration with a pensioner, Mrs Moran, who lived in the block for the work **Living with Practical Realities** (displayed in this room).

Tate Archive, Stephen Willats collection TGA 8128. Z05726

