



Ian Wilson, Circle on the Floor, 1968. Collection Van Abbemuseum, Photo Peter Cox.

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in cooperation with	Chantal Kleinmeulman
text	Chantal Kleinmeulman
photographer	Peter Cox

Conceptual artist Ian Wilson (1940 in Durban, South Africa) has been interested in spoken language as an art form since 1968. He describes his own work as 'oral communication', and later on as 'discussion'. At Wilson's own request, his work is never recorded either as film or audio in order to preserve the transient nature of the spoken word.

In 1976, at the invitation of former director Rudi Fuchs, Wilson visited the Van Abbemuseum for the first time. Afterwards, he organised discussions there almost every year until 1986. The museum is currently working on an overview catalogue in collaboration with Mamco in Geneva and MACBA in Barcelona. This is the first time that a record is being made of his fleeting

works, using documentation and the recollections of participants. Plug In #47 is being put together in relation to this publication. The book will be released in March 2009, at which time the museum will also host a new discussion by Wilson.

At first, Wilson's artistic explorations took place entirely in the monochrome. He was absorbed by questions relating to perception and painting. This is aptly illustrated by the nameless object of fibreglass and white pigment (1967) recently purchased by the Van Abbemuseum. In it, he created a slight convex curvature atop a circular surface. When hung on the wall at eye level, this 'disc' is so subtle that it does not cast any shadows. The fibreglass object presents the perceptive viewer with an ambiguous scene – sometimes it simulates a cavity in the wall, only to pop out of it again a moment later. His last physical objects, 'Circle on the Floor' and 'Circle on the Wall', were created in early 1968. Almost completely stripped of any material substance, these works are circles consisting only of outlines drawn in chalk and pencil, respectively. Using Wilson's meticulous instructions, the circles can be reproduced for use in any exhibition.

Ian Wilson

After some time, Wilson realised that it was no longer necessary to create an object in order to realise a concept. Wilson: 'I found that I could think or say the circle just as well, that I didn't need to draw it in order to convey the idea I was exploring.' The movement towards dematerialisation was a widespread tendency among artists in the 1960s. Language predominated as the means of achieving this, and artists employed it in various ways to stimulate a mental process inside the 'viewer' of the work.

Wilson exploits the fact that language can be used to conjure up an image or explain a concept. Forming a mental image of a 'cube' requires a simple thought process – the concept of 'infinity', on the other hand, represents a higher level of linguistic abstraction. In his text entitled 'Conceptual Art' (1984), he says: 'Language is the most formless means of expression. Its capacity to describe concepts without physical or visual references carries us into an advanced state of abstraction.' In 2002 he explained that 'by means of language you can grasp the non-visual world.' By letting go of material objects and continuing his artistic exploration in the realm of the spoken word, he was able to make the transition from visual abstraction to non visual abstraction.

Initially, Wilson's verbal work was of an informal nature, taking place on the street, at random exhibition openings or in people's homes. It was in this manner that he presented his work 'Time': the word in its spoken form. A deeper discussion on the subject of 'time' also emerged. In 1969, Wilson shifted his field of exploration to the medium itself – 'oral communication as art form' – and in 1970 was invited to present 'Oral Communication' in Europe.

Over the course of the 1970s, his discussions took on a more formal character, and his interests shifted towards 'The Known and Unknown', based on Plato's 'The Parmenides'. In contrast to a 'performance', during a discussion the audience can actively take part in realising the concept of 'oral communication'. Wilson does not want the discussion to be recorded either on film or audio. He is interested in the concentrated moment in which ideas emerge and are formulated in language. What remains after the discussion is a subjective and unstable thought in the minds of those present. Wilson summarises the core of these discussions in a book series entitled 'section'.

From 1970 onwards, his discussions were announced using cards, which served as invitations informing the addressee of where Wilson would be and when. Purchases of works were confirmed by a certificate containing a printed and signed declaration by the artist, stating that a discussion had taken place on that date. Wilson had specific ideas concerning the formulation and layout of both the invitation cards and the certificates. These purchase certificates and invitation cards were the only material remnants of the discussion.

In 1986, Wilson stopped holding discussions and concentrated on printed language. From the late 1980s onward, unique series of his artists' books began to appear, such as 'The Set of 25 Sections: 90-114, with Absolute Knowledge' shown here, from 1993. Partially due to renewed interest in Wilson's spoken works, he started group discussions again in 1999, which to date have focused on the subject of 'The Absolute'.

In early March 2009, after an absence of 23 years, Wilson will once again be present in the Van Abbemuseum for a discussion.

Art work

Ian Wilson

Discussion, 1976 27 April, 1976

Circle on the Floor, 1968

Discussion, 1980 14 May, 1980

Discussion, 1981 11 May, 1981

Discussion, 1982 22 June, 1982

Untitled, 1966

Discussion, 1985 13 January, 1985

*announcement cards, s.a.**

*Red Square after Malevich, 1966**

*announcement cards, s.a.**

The Set of 25 Sections: 90-114, with Absolute Knowledge, 1993

* On loan