

**Stephen Willats: *Social Resource Project for Tennis Clubs***

**Bonington Gallery, Nottingham**

**December 2022**

Over the past 20 years, the restaging and revisiting of artworks from the canon of conceptualism has gathered pace. On the one hand, such market-driven initiatives risk fetishising the ephemera of Conceptual Art, entombing its documents beneath glass. On the other hand, curatorial initiatives to restage the performances of yesteryear, or to reactivate putatively ‘dead archives’, are often driven as much by a desire to critically reconsider material afresh as they are to valorise and render artworks visible or enter them into the exhibition-as-event economy.

It is with these caveats that one might approach the British conceptual artist Stephen Willats’s ‘Social Resource Project for Tennis Clubs’, a work first initiated in Nottingham in 1972. For this project, Willats brought together participants from four different tennis clubs across the city to collectively remake the rules of tennis. Fifty years on, the project’s acquisition by Nottingham City Museum offers the opportunity to revisit this material in a new iteration across two sites: a commemorative

restaging of the tennis tournament at the Park Tennis Club, set within a leafy private Victorian estate, and an exhibition in the city's nearby art school at the Bonington Gallery, where Willats taught until the early 1970s.

As a young artist and educator, Willats describes this period as formative, catalysed by the emergence of computing, cybernetics and the transdisciplinarity of social sciences. Informed by this ethos, Willats proposed a radical recalibration of the artwork as 'active data' in a bid to liberate art from its formalist trappings or objecthood. Fundamental to this positivism was Willats's desire to forge a practice beyond the studio, instead working directly with participants to assert mutual agency over their environments – from tower blocks to shopping centres to art schools. In this regard, the tennis club presents a fitting model for reassessment: a space for socialising as much as sport, enmeshed within a web of codes, regulations and formalities.

On entering Bonington Gallery, the centre of the white cube space is occupied by the 'archive monitor', a semi-enclosed structure that self-consciously functions as a repository; an exhibition within an exhibition. Inside, working materials

formative to the project's first iteration are sensitively housed: handwritten participation slips and letters to club secretaries are preserved within vitrines, and blank questionnaires from Willats's *Tennis Club Manual*, 1971–72, hang on the walls. Meanwhile, five diagrams explore theoretical models for the tennis tournaments themselves. Relations between participants, contexts and audiences are reduced to a graphic score of alphanumeric inputs and flowcharts. Some nodes suggest conditions and restraints, others predict future outputs and determinations.

Given that each manifestation of the tennis tournament is but one possible staging or determination of these frameworks, it raises the question of how important is the distinct character of each of the two stagings to the totality of the artwork. After all, and more often than not, Willats's exhibition work is typically encountered through diagrams.

One answer might be found in Willats's treatment of the different stagings themselves. For the exhibition visitor, there are no documentary images of either tennis tournament, with only the limited trace of paraphernalia interned in the archive. A short, printed exhibition text notes that the first iteration employed six

participants and was staged without an audience, its artistic recognition resting on an interview with Teresa Gleadowe in a local magazine and a brief mention by a reporter from the *Financial Times*. In stark contrast, attending an iteration presented this autumn revealed a very different, almost Monty Python-esque tone: more than 20 players equipped with a colourful assortment of balls, inflatable props and captioned signs enacted four different sets of rules to a cheering audience of over 100 people.

For some visitors to the gallery, the lack of images documenting these activities might feel somewhat disappointing. Equally, however, there is something curiously liberating and stimulating in their absence. In their place, Willats's frameworks present a set of propositions in which viewers can construct their own possibilities. Through this, 'Social Resource Project for Tennis Clubs' retains an open-endedness, evading easy foreclosure.

Back at Bonington, two long sequences of black-and-white photographs (documenting the same four Nottingham tennis clubs), face each another, 50 years apart. Encircling the exhibition's perimeter, the images possess the quality of datasets. Alongside the

faded architecture and rhythmic geometry of the courts, Willats's images capture changes in active and passive forms of control: from dense shrubbery to buckling chain-link fences, from security cameras to rushed graffiti tags. Devoid of people, they index the familiar accumulated marks of authority and resistance that constitute a constant struggle.

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