

The Artist: Live at Milton Keynes
Gilda Williams

The first time I wrote about the artist was in response to a 1996 solo exhibition in London, titled *Be Me*. There, thirty-one artists, friends and acquaintances were invited to be the artist for a day over the course of a month, leaving the affects of their day to generate the unplanned content of the exhibition. Resulting artefacts included a spaghetti-western style slide show by artist Silke Otto-Knapp (something about the artist being half-Italian), a video by artist Patrick Brill giving an irreverent tour of the artist's flat and critic Gregor Muir's text about how he spent the day being a famous fashion designer with the same first name as the artist. How was I to review such an exhibition, which centred on the process of its own making and was disconnected from (though not indifferent to) the resulting forms? To review the exhibition 'straight', analysing the works on display for their formal merits, was inconceivable and yet to reduce the exhibition solely to an idea, ignoring its final content, was equally inadequate. In order to solve my conundrum of how sensibly to write about *Be Me*, I decided to self-enlist as the thirty-second invitee and 'become the artist' myself, writing the review as if from the artist's nervous perspective, watching the show slowly and unpredictably evolve. My text was signed with the artist's name (not 'Gilda Williams') in an attempt to transmit the show's spirit of self-effacement and ambiguous authorship. I too wanted to join this temporary community – crash the party, so to speak, even if all the guests had already gone home.

In hindsight (and modesty aside), that was probably a good strategy to adopt, one which allowed me to describe the show's content – even some of the invisible contributions, such as artist Liam Gillick spending the day getting his hair cut at a barbershop in the artist's hometown of Manchester, or artist Andrew Cross's day weeding the gallery garden – while reflecting something of the artist's method of play and surprise. Such a writing strategy, I discovered, was missing when I set out to pen this catalogue essay – what tone should I assume? I could ventriloquise a strictly art-historical voice and position the artist's work as a late rejoinder to 1960s–70s-era conceptual practices such as John Baldessari's, whose *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get an Equilateral Triangle (Best of 36 Tries)* (1972–73) perhaps offers a similar repeated, game-like, uncontrollable and yet system-based art, which points to the kind of work that the artist makes today. This old-school 1960s–70s Conceptualism I would couple with some updated YBA example, such as Martin Creed, who all but disappears within and behind the work, sometimes doing almost nothing in its creation – for example *Work No. 121: A crumpled ball of paper in every room in a house* (1995), which consists of some amateurish-looking photographs of balls of A4 sheets of paper in anonymous-looking rooms. These are affordable forms of art-making, readily forged by anyone who chooses to do so. Such art strategies display the remarkable if contradictory desire of artists who both insist and refuse to be part of a system, playing by the rules only if they can make up their own baffling rulebook – then sticking maddeningly to it. The resulting artworks are usually marked by humble, almost administrative aesthetics to underline the unmonumental, straightforward nature of the work. Unlike Old Master art, we are not left asking 'how' the artist made it (we could remake most ourselves), perhaps only, 'why?'.

In this way, using carefully plucked-out art-historical precedents, I could invent an ideal genealogy for the artist's work, identifying adoptive parents and cousins in order to smooth out and locate the work's sometimes puzzling nature. But doing so would probably miss the point of the art; like writing a 'straight' review of *Be Me*, I'd be imposing a gravitas which contradicts what is finally for me the

work's real appeal: its lightness, its strange inner cohesion and the artist's candid willingness to be surprised by the results of the work. I also want to respect the artist's unique place in the British art world: a parallel but constant position within it, as an artist working strictly on their own terms. 'You can't step back from communication whether you want it or not', the artist has said in relation to the often understated work. In writing about this art I was faced with putting into words what the nature of the artist's voiceless yet unavoidable communication might be.

In 1999, the artist made an artwork titled *Went to America didn't say a word*. On that occasion, the artist spoke to no one during a twenty-four hour stay in the US, but recorded the entire experience. This paradoxical 'recording of silence' constitutes the artwork – effectively extending John Cage's *4 minutes 33 seconds* (c.1952) by 1,435 minutes and 27 seconds. Like Cage, the artist draws our attention to the unplanned sounds that fill any 'silence'. The artist did not speak, but did communicate – for example by writing notes with some Manhattan destination to a taxi driver. The artist even managed a (wordless) encounter with diva Julia Roberts: how very British, to meet a world-famous, glamorous Hollywood movie star (the highest paid actress in the world at the time) and then to be numbed into an English conceptual silence. The artist's silence in this work suggests an ambiguous relationship with the former colony across the Atlantic (struck dumb in admiration? or rendered speechless by its vulgarity?), the artist mutely absorbing all and returning with a prized and perishable, invisible souvenir: the peripheral sounds of the artist's inevitable communication.

The artist's work *is*, in fact, indebted to 1960–70s Conceptual art, which was an art about its own making, about the artist's place in that making and about the language and systems that art can establish in order to carry meaning. Most of the artist's works consist of inventing or discovering a system with which to generate artworks in the artist's absence, putting that system into play and sometimes behaving more as an enabling force than a full-fledged author. We sense echoes of Baldessari but also Vito Acconci, for example, in works such as his *Following Piece* (1969) in which the American artist followed a different, unsuspecting person each day – his 'victim' unwittingly deciding the course of the artist's daily performance. Or Ed Ruscha's early projects, when he famously decided to photograph gasoline stations and parking lots in Los Angeles in a deliberately 'anonymous' style, creating curiously irresistible and almost autistically coherent collections of pictures, such as *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963). The artist's analogously systemic artworks include *ANOTHER ANOTHER RING OF BALLS* (2010), in which the artist set out to find magazine photographs which happen to include a perfect circle – a playing ball, a globe, an aerial view of a coffee cup, the moon. The artist cuts out the entire page, then sequences the pictures on the wall in size order based on the ascending dimension of the circle's diameter; the printed image is then positioned on the wall so that its circle occupies the centre of an imaginary straight line 'drawn' round the perimeter of the gallery. These photographs lose their original function – as advertisements, or sporting action shots – and are reduced to meaningless background noise for the new centre of the work: the circle, the sidelined geometric perfection existing as if silent and pure, lost in the picture and waiting to be rescued and redeemed.

In *WOMAN MAN MAN WOMAN WOMAN WOMAN MAN MAN* 1975 GEORGE M. HESTER (2010), the artist matches pages from two paired books published in the 1970s, one filled with male nudes and the other with females. The books have been taken apart and put back together in the same order, halving each body and combining one male, one female half together to produce a sequence of arbitrarily-yet-systematically-generated, mismatched hermaphrodites. It is perhaps a deeply romantic

(if markedly heterosexual) work, recalling Aristotle's idea that love is a single soul inhabiting two bodies. Philosophy aside, the resulting figure's utter incongruity – the third-sex body bearing no sign of an attempt at reconciling male and female, or of joining smoothly one figure with its partner – is somewhat comic. One crucial continuity between the artist's work and Baldessari's or Acconci's conceptual art is the reliance on humour – a tradition of the absurd in twentieth century art that reaches back at least to Dada. These artists all adopted humour for the purpose of rethinking their work beyond any traditional straightjacket or outmoded expectations for art. Such comedic lightness is crucial to its value: an artist's peculiar, sometimes unfathomable system of logic serves to question the validity of any system whether political, social, economic, or legal.

In *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art after Modernism* (2004), art historian Briony Fer offers a brilliant and wholly original reappraisal of post-war art, rethinking the severe logic of this art in a newfound, looser sense which, with the benefit of some forty years of history, allows her to present 'art after Modernism' on new terms.¹ Fer reconsiders, for example, the usage among 1960s artists of seriality – a key anti-art shift away from Modernist collage, the earlier preferred process of bringing disparate pieces together to form an artistic whole. Conventionally, the preference for seriality has been seen as a move away from subject-based, self-expressive, collage-based Modern art in favour of Conceptual or Minimal art's objectifying or machine-like processes. Instead, Fer suggests that serial-based art was actually liberating for the subject, opening one of the few places in culture that allows 'freedom within repetition' – in contrast with the constrictive uses of repetition witnessed in society at large. In Fer's view, seriality in art is, paradoxically, a form of liberation.

This artist's work seems to be following such a logic, inventing spaces of freedom through an imposed, repeated system which persists undisturbed, usually until it arrives at its 'natural', unforced close. Notions of infinity, limits and framing come into play in most of the artist's works. Often, the temporal or spatial limitations in the work are as restricted as the art-generating systems themselves. Some of the artworks exist around a time frame or limit decided for them beforehand: *Went to America didn't say a word* was predetermined to last twenty-four hours; *Be Me* necessarily ran for a month. Book-based works, instead, are limited in extent by their page count. *WOMAN MAN MAN WOMAN ... or 16-24 FEVRIER 1985 LE LIVRE BLANC DE GENÈVE OLIVIER LOMBARD JEAN-CLAUDE SILVY* (2010) in which the pages of a 1985 book of photographs of Geneva taken after a record-breaking snowstorm are laid out on a red-tinted light box circling the perimeter of a room – necessarily come to an end when the books themselves are consumed, when every page has been taken apart and repositioned in the artist's newfound system: hermaphroditic collages, or a red, illuminated line around the gallery. Their spatial 'frame' is inherent to the original material from which they are made (books) and require no decision-making on the part of the artist, ending effortlessly by themselves.

In *ANOTHER ANOTHER RING OF BALLS* (2010) the artist has set up a rational/irrational system which could effectively carry on to infinity, the artist continuing to find pictures-with-circles day after day, reordering the found results in size order forever, in gallery after gallery. The work points to the endless proliferation of pictures around us and our inability to absorb them; the systems that the artist invents become a kind of bizarre window through which to look with attention at a random subset of the innumerable overlooked pictures everywhere around us. In *The Infinite Line*, Fer writes about a new understanding of the concept of infinity in post-war art, whose literal depiction had been attempted in the representations of limitless painted heavens extending from sculpted pillars

on the ceilings of Baroque churches. In contrast, artist Piero Manzoni's boundless series of *Achromes* (1958–62) – accumulations on canvas of white substances such as kaolin, cotton wool, rabbit fur – point to another kind of infinity: neither symbolic, nor divine, nor abstract. Such a picture of infinity no longer stands against matter and the material world, or competes with divinity, but is brought down to earth and contained – literally, in Manzoni's *Lines* (1959–61), kilometres of ink lines traced on a long sheet of rolled paper and 'captured' in cylindrical metal canisters. Some of the artist's works also present events that are by definition limitless, unable to adopt any logical framing in time. In *Violin Siren*, three trained violinists walked through MoMA PS1, New York, in 2004 (among other venues, including Zoo Art Fair, London, in 2008, where this performance was subsequently repeated) playing a sequence of notes which exactly mimicked a police or ambulance siren. In everyday life these sirens seem to go on indefinitely, disappearing from earshot only when they have raced past and sped far away. Instead, with violin sirens echoing ceaselessly in the gallery, visitors were made aware of the endlessness of the siren's melody; they found themselves waiting for an end that never came, becoming aware that this sequence of notes was 'composed' to be carried on in perpetuity, with no natural end. It is an automatic music whose notes of alarm extend to infinity as the soundtrack of some unseen disaster; the sirens finally stopped only when one left the gallery (with some relief), when the art-viewing experience was over. Like Manzoni's, this is a contemporary representation of the infinite: earth-bound rather than heavenly, relentless rather than sublime and grounded in everyday life rather than projected towards some abstracted, celestial abyss.

For Fer, Manzoni's new ideas of infinity no longer continued an ideal form of Modernism either, 'a kind of transcendent authority ensuring the subject at its centre', but the opposite: a means of prolonging *ad infinitum* a disintegrating subjectivity: 'a falling to pieces'. Alongside a Manzoni-like depiction of a secular sort of infinity, there is a lot of 'falling to pieces' in the artist's work: bodies break into halves, the pages of a magazine fall back into separate pages, words fall into pieces (*POLICE ICE*, 2010). Fer writes about the repetition that is apparent, for example, in Eadweard Muybridge's photographic work – arguably the Victorian root of Minimalism's obsession with seriality – wherein human activity gets split into many consecutive, strange and unfamiliar poses. Through repetition, Muybridge's photographed bodies lose their subjectivity to become ciphers of human life – yet fail to produce the timeless gestures they set out to be: they are utterly resonant of their own age. *WOMAN MAN MAN WOMAN ...* is a similar period piece; bodies are eroticised according to the fashion and technology of their day, the mid 1970s. We cannot observe these young beautiful bodies without the recognition that they have all declined into late middle age by now and are reconfigured here in a third body – as if born again, later in life, in a rejuvenated, hermaphroditic form.

In *WOMAN MAN MAN WOMAN ...* we are on one hand returned to what Fer identifies as the Modernist technique of collage, perhaps exemplified today in the figurative composites that artist John Stezaker creates in such works as *Evolution* (1996), a collage which also produces an uncanny three-legged being emerging from the miraculous intersection of two nudes. The artist's collage work – such as *WOMAN MAN MAN WOMAN ...* or *From Navels to Nipples Henry Moore* (2006), in which a perfect circle was cut between the navel and (nearest) nipple of a naked or semi-naked figure printed in a book, allowing an obscene circular peek at the page beneath – differ from Stezaker's amazing and highly idiosyncratic collages, which in many ways update Modernist, subject-heavy art-making. Only Stezaker himself can bring his collages to light; in contrast, the artist's systemic method of generating collages for example in *WOMAN MAN MAN WOMAN ...* can be re-enacted by anyone and uniquely combines the 'subjective' strategy of collage which marks Modernism with

the 'objective' process of post-1960s seriality. Again, like Stezaker's, the artist's process forms a third, surprise result of its own: a 'part' removed to form a new 'whole/hole'. As with *Be Me*, the artist is removed from the process and has a system do the making, discovering the art only on completion. There is, of course, nothing actually 'random' in the work's production: the system has been invented and imposed by the artist and so the sense of absence or withdrawal of the artist is illusionary. The artist is always, inevitably and unmistakably, at the centre of the work, communicating like the silent, absent centre in *Went to America didn't say a word*.

In rethinking Manzoni's *Achromes*, Fer considers the artist's use of the colour white not as a pure or symbolic colour, but as a void; the Italian post-war artist wanted to 'remake white by removing its mystical and transcendental connotations', eliminating any symbolic meaning. In *16-24 FEVRIER 1985 LE LIVRE BLANC DE GENÈVE ...* images of the city are blanketed in white: the city is transformed into a white monochrome and then artificially remade into a differently-hued monochrome through the red electric bulbs of the light box installation. Behind the printed image we observe the see-through of the image on the other side of the page: like Kazimir Malevich's *White on White* (1918), one (flawed) image of whiteness is overlaid transparently on another. The work can be seen as updating the long tradition of artists who depicted landscape and cityscapes under a blanket of snow – from Pieter Breughel the Elder to Caspar David Friedrich, from Claude Monet (*Snow Scene at Argenteuil*, 1875) to Camille Pissarro (*The Louvre under Snow*, 1902). The cover of whiteness allowed those artists to instil a sense of visual uniformity and atmospheric silence to the scene, bringing the place as if to a natural standstill for the painted picture. The artist's are not, however, such idealised images; snow may cover the city, but the paper facing us fails to cover the ghostly picture printed on the reverse, adding another layer of distance (like the snow) between us and the landscape. Like *Went to America didn't say a word*, *16-24 FEVRIER 1985 LE LIVRE BLANC DE GENÈVE ...* forces an unnatural silence to a busy urban place in order to reveal a picture of the city which shows no trace of the artist/observer.

The snow in these black-and-whites is untouched: there are no paths, footprints or traces of the original photographer, offering the illusion of an image-making without human presence (not unlike the artist's art-making). A denim carpet running through the exhibition at Milton Keynes, titled *NO NO MORE THAN DENIM (FUCK FUCK FUCK)* (2010), mixes the footstep traces of the artist with all the visitors who came to the show, an everyday red carpet guiding the entire audience, like labouring VIPs, through the exhibition. (Like the artist, 'jeans' are also half-Italian, having derived their name from the French word for the Italian seaside city of Genoa, *Gênes*, where the durable garment was first made for its hard-working sailors). In 1960, Fluxus artist Stanley Brouwn laid sheets of paper on the street to collect the footprints of passers-by to form the work *Steps of Pedestrians on Paper*, another work inventing a system whereby others effortlessly create a unique artwork on behalf of the artist – with their feet. Another such 'effortless' and ubiquitous method of art-making is evidenced in works such as *Harry Winston, Beauty Without Rules* (2007) in which the artist carefully unstaples a glossy magazine and exhibits, untouched, the two images which happened to join together on the printed page and which we formerly experienced as 'distant': one picture occupying the front half of the magazine and the other somewhere towards the back. The resulting image is a kind of uncanny, unpremeditated diptych in which bodies or landscapes merge as if by magic. Some have a mesmerising erotic charge: kisses and embraces seem almost in movement as nearly matched 'halves' seem to move more closely together, like secret lovers who are finally allowed to go public. Importantly, the artist displays these works in a deep frame, to allow the gentle fold of the sheet's

centre to remain intact, rendering them quite sculptural while confessing their readymade quality. Works in this series perpetually re-enact the artist's singular moment of discovery: when two humans, landscapes or machines were seen to have been brought miraculously together, or a kiss was oddly completed and the disjointed yet perfect image emerged as the magazine was gently taken apart. Each moment is endlessly re-experienced each time we look – often with a degree of amazement – at the results. Were they instead conventionally framed and flattened, these 'diptychs' would lose much of their suggestive power and become random combinations – they could even have been 'Photoshopped' or manipulated into position (they aren't). Again, the work has been produced, unwittingly and by strangers, for the artist to extract them – readymade and awaiting.

In Michel De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), the French author contrasts two kinds of time: casual (or 'dead') time and programmed time, filled with events which can be subsequently narrated. Both of these are made to co-exist in the artist's art-making. The artist's studio life mimics casual time – casually browsing magazines, for example – which by virtue of the art-making system become oddly overlapped with programmed time. Eventually, like the circles in *ANOTHER ANOTHER RING OF BALLS*, they meet in the centre, forming a practice that is at once intensely productive and curiously void. The work points to another absent centre: the absent centre literally represented in *From Navels to Nipples Henry Moore*, where bodies are emptied of their central essence.

This exhibition at Milton Keynes marks the first major UK showing of the artist's work, despite having been a staple figure in the London art scene for the last twenty years. The artist has said that each project is made for an audience of about twenty people; is that elitist? Or modest? Or does this contained ambition point to the artist's wish to engage only in an authentic communication with a small audience – a quiet communication that is not meaningfully possible between a single human being (the artist) and numerous (unknown) art visitors? The subject matter and materials of the artist's work – the human body, simple geometric forms, mainstream photography and advertising – are hardly esoteric and the systems generating the work are finally quite simple. The art hardly presents a conceptual impenetrability that only a handful of initiates could possibly 'get'; it's more the opposite: these works celebrate their own exposed availability. I see the artist's work as a subtly utopian endeavour, one which proposes a world where small gestures, quiet discipline and the acceptance of human fallibility and chance are prized things, worthy of our attention.

1. Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-making Art after Modernism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004.