

## The Power of Words: Ian Wilson's Troika

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## The Power of Words: Ian Wilson's Troika

Anaïs Castro

**KW INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART  
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Since the Kunst-Werke (KW) Institute's founding in the early 1990s, it has been a vital organ in Berlin's art ecosystem and has helped make the German capital the global art centre that it is today. Following an administrative overhaul in 2016, the first season, under the new director Krist Gruijthuisen, is nothing if not an ambitious artistic program. Centered around Ian Wilson's art practice, which combines recent work with signature pieces such as *Discussions* (1968), the exhibition expands into a series of three parallel presentations, showing the work of emerging artists Hanne Lippard, Adam Pendleton and Paul Elliman chosen in response to Wilson's exploration of the spoken word.

The program concept was for Wilson's work to be "physically and conceptually embedded" with that of the emerging artists, "serving as a framework for exploring roles of language and communication, and the broader significance of interaction between human beings."<sup>1</sup> The curatorial nature of this program makes it essentially impossible to consider Ian Wilson's exhibition at the KW independently from those of Lippard, Pendleton and Elliman.

South African artist Ian Wilson is a key figure in the dematerialization of art of the late 1960s, and at the time, critics such as Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler documented his work.<sup>2</sup> When Wilson and other artists such as Joseph Kosuth worked towards dematerializing art, they were reacting against the rapid acceleration of capitalism in the previous two decades as well as conceding to a Platonic perspective of art in which the art object is not complete in itself, but rather happens in its encounter with the viewer.

In fact, the participation of the viewer is absolutely essential to the experience of a piece such as *Discussions*, which, as the title indicates, functions as a conversation about art that takes place among visitors in the gallery. On the wall of the KW, a typewritten text announced "This work is installed once the word time is spoken"—this is *Time (spoken)* from 1982. Close by, *Circle on the floor* (1968) is exhibited—literally



a chalked circle on the ground—which quietly points to the artist’s former years as an abstract painter. The space is bare, elegant but perhaps a bit dull. It would be unfair to characterize Ian Wilson’s work as tedious, but it is evident in this exhibition that his work alone is not the focal point, but rather a theoretical framework for the other exhibitions in KW.

The first of the series was Hanne Lippard’s *Flesh*. In the centre of the main room, a large cream-coloured caged staircase spiralled upwards. If it were not for its sizeable scale, it would have been an unexciting sight. Upon climbing up, one finds oneself in a strange space that feels comfortable despite the low ceiling and the odd de-saturated tannish-pink carpet. Lippard’s voice suddenly fills the room and feels like ripe fruit: rich, flavourful, enveloping, magnetizing. The meaning of her words barely matters as the rhythm of her language resonates in the room. The sequence of words, organized by conceptual or aural closeness is delivered at a nearly hypnotizing pace. Her voice possesses a richness that adds texture to the monochromatic installation space and warms the grey winter Berlin sky visible through a series of high windows. *Flesh* is a sensory experience, if nothing else. Upon walking back down the stairs and through Ian Wilson’s exhibition again, one begins to ponder the power of words, because the recent encounter with Lippard’s *Flesh* has shed some light on the physical experience of the spoken word; its materiality.

The second artist to cohabit with Ian Wilson’s exhibition was Adam Pendleton; his work *shot him in the face* occupied the entire third floor of the KW. This ambitious installation took over the entire wall of the room. Layers of archival material, black and white photographs, texts from art history, poetry and African liberation movements were superimposed, making it a visually striking cacophony of messages all organized around the opening line of Ron Silliman’s poem *Albany*: “If the function of writing is to ‘express the world’...” On the floor leaning against an adjacent wall, two large letters made of mirror and obscured with black lettering spell the word ‘WE: *WE (we are not successive)* bears the question of how language is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. Candice Nembhard has described the political foundation of Pendleton’s practice as “an attempt at dealing with the complexity of language, by quietly addressing the intricacy of overlapping and intersectional identities.”<sup>3</sup> Pendleton’s contribution to the show positioned the spoken word as part of social, racial and political discourse through carefully combining images and text that were reminiscent of early cinematic experiments such as the Kuleshov effect. When thinking about the discussions Wilson’s work triggered, one suddenly considers them as political and social rehearsals before even existing as conversations about art. The curatorial decision to exhibit one of Wilson’s early monochromatic paintings in the same space made this increasingly evident to me.

Finally, Paul Elliman’s *As you said* includes many objects, written documents, and sound elements installed on the floor and on tables, as well as two large photographs on temporary billboards. Elliman also produced a piece in collaboration with dancer Elena Giannotti. His multi-disciplinary work addresses the actions of language and communication, and tries to highlight how they are carried out. Using particular techniques and gestures that are learnt and rehearsed in

society, he endeavours to trigger these responses from the viewer. Elliman considers the construction of communication and “explores the range of human expressions as a kind of typography.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite the strong links that bind Ian Wilson’s work and that of the three invited artists, there is a fundamental difference between them: Wilson’s art is indeterminate. But while indeterminate art is often accused of being prosaic, the KW has succeeded in reactivating his practice through the prism of a new generation of artists. The result testifies to the curatorial *savoir-faire* of the new team and foretells an excitingly bright future for the KW.

1. Website KW Institute, Ian Wilson 20 January – 14 May 17 (web) accessed: <http://www.kw-berlin.de/en/ian-wilson/>
2. Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, *Six Years, The Dematerialization of Art From 1966 to 1972*, (1973).
3. Candice Nembhard, “Words // ‘Shot him in the face’ at KW: An Interview with Adam Pendleton” *Berlinartlink* (web) Accessed: <http://www.berlinartlink.com/2017/03/10/words-shot-him-in-the-face-at-kw-an-interview-with-adam-pendleton/>
4. Website KW Institute, Paul Elliman 18 March – 14 May 17 (web) accessed: <http://www.kw-berlin.de/en/paul-elliman-as-you-said/>

Anais Castro is an art critic and curator based in Leipzig, Germany. Her projects include *Monochrome*,<sup>3</sup> *Porcelain: Breaking Tradition, Moving Still | Still Moving* and more recently *#self*. She has had articles published in *thisistomorrow*, *Vie des Arts*, *esse arts + opinions*, *ESPACE art actuel* and *Line Magazine*. Castro holds a BFA in Art History from Concordia University and a Masters in History of Art, Curating and Criticism from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. She is also the Executive Director of Art Mür Leipzig.