Ian Wilson

From *Chalk Circle* to Full Circle

*Dia Art Foundation Artists on Artists Lecture Series, New York, 10 December 2013*
When the Dia Art Foundation invited me to speak about one of the artists in their collection, I chose Ian Wilson for the most personal of reasons. I would like to take you back to 1983. I was running a little storefront gallery in the industrial sector of Vancouver, Canada. One of the first exhibitions that I did was to co-organize an exhibition with the artist Ian Wallace that included Wilson’s *Chalk Circle on the Floor* (1968) along with works by Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, On Kawara, and Lawrence Weiner. I remember feeling a sense of exhilaration over an exhibition of such celebrated artists in what was basically my living room at the time.

The works for Wilson, Buren, and Weiner were realized by following instruction cards. The instructions for *Chalk Circle on the Floor* were as follows:

Attach a white china chalk pencil to one end of a 3-foot-long thin wire (the actual chalk center of the pencil would be 3/8 of an inch before sharpening). At the other end of the wire attach a nail. After hammering the nail into the floor, draw the circle around the nail, keeping the wire taut. Using the enclosed photo of the density of the white chalk, gradually build up the line until it is 1/2 inch thick. When the circle is drawn, remove the nail from the floor. From time to time using the above described method, redraw any portions of the circle that have been smudged, keeping the circle as clean and as well defined as possible.1

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Chalk Circle on the Floor inspired me to think about the relationship between art and democracy. The work existed as an infinite edition. This meant that it could be acquired by any number of individuals or institutions. The work also challenged (without disaffirming) a view of art that I had always held regarding the integral place of drawing in the production of art.

I had always loved to draw. But coming as I did from a poor and fractious Cantonese family, a career in art was never an option, even if there were many times that I felt art, at least in terms of drawing, was my calling. My mother spoke not a word of English and the world beyond Vancouver’s Chinatown was, at least in my earliest years, like the proverbial edge of a flat world where ships risk falling off into the abyss.

What was drilled into me as a boy was that I should pursue a profession that guaranteed a good and steady salary. So in university, I studied an area of chemistry and soon found myself working in a laboratory dedicated to pesticide research. I spent a lot of time in a white lab coat with pocket calculator attached to my belt and Dimilin baseball cap on my head. Dimilin is the trade name for diflubenzuron, a benzoylurea-type insecticide of the benzamide class, a derivative of benzoic acid, which is used in forest management to control insect pests by inhibiting the production of chitin, which is the main component used by arthropods, including insects, to build their exoskeletons. It is also, by the way, one of the metabolites of diflubenzuron, 4-chloraniline, which has been classified by the United States Environmental Protection Agency as a probable human carcinogen.

One day in the laboratory where I worked I had a day of reckoning. My superior, Dr. Bob Costello, put his arm around my shoulder and said, “Ken, you keep working the way you are, and one day this lab will be yours.” I scanned the room about me and all I could see were other white-coated co-workers, many also wearing Dimilin caps. Within a week, I quit science and entered into art at the very tail end of conceptualism.

Wilson’s work is difficult to research because there is so little in the way of proper labelling and documentation. Art relies heavily on its ability to be documented. Art generally has a form, even if it is an aesthetic presence mentally conceived. But Wilson’s work, as Edward Allington has written, seems “to be directed at establishing something even less tangible than this.”

What does it mean to make art over a long career that is so resistant to the artistic and even historical archive? Wilson stopped making object-based art in 1968 and devoted himself entirely to conversation as
an art form. Two years later, he gave a telling statement about why he chose language as his art:

I present oral communication as an object ... all art is information and communication. I’ve chosen to speak rather than sculpt. I’ve freed art from a specific place. It’s now possible for everyone. I’m diametrically opposed to the precious object. My art is not visual, but visualized.3

I wrote to Wilson to ask him whether he missed making object-based art and time spent in the studio. I asked him this because it seemed to me there was a gentle and quietly elegiac quality to his early, object-based art that shone through even in the sparse amount of visual documentation I was able to secure from Dia on his work.

He replied:

No, I don’t miss making objects at all. I like the space I live in to be empty. But there are plenty of decisions involved in arranging discussions that have a structure that encourages participation: the subject (of the discussions), the number of people, etc. There are so many different types of discussions that require different approaches. The art system is the same as it was when I started. We were more critical of the establishment then.4

“I like the space I live in to be empty.” This line struck me. I live a rather quiet life with my wife and son. We do not have a television. We are not on social media. Nor do we subscribe to Netflix. We play with our little boy a lot. We read to him before he goes to sleep at night. And when there is time, I spend it working on my art. We do not believe in accumulating things and we have made it a habit to relinquish items to our neighbourhood thrift store on a regular basis. But the space we live in is not empty. It is full.

*Untitled (disc)*, from 1966, was one of a series of untitled discs that Wilson made using wood and plaster. It represents a final stage before his abandonment of materially constructed objects. *Untitled (disc)* is a circular object, lightly convex, which, once installed on the wall, takes on many associations: a navel on which the viewer casts his or her gaze or an outgrowth of the wall itself. There is tension between what is inward and what is outward, what is whole and what is empty.

At the time of *Untitled (disc)*, Wilson was known primarily as a monochrome painter interested in the metaphorical content of non-objective
painting, to which adjoining aesthetic value to language was also a concern. In 1966, he exhibited *Red Square*, a monochrome painting measuring approximately twenty inches square and realized on a thin sheet of fibreglass with inward curving edges that minimize the effect of shadows on the wall. The reduction of chromatic elements was important to Wilson’s ultimate move to abandon all object form.

Much more intriguing is the explicit reference to Kazimir Malevich’s celebrated work from 1913 of the same title. To pay homage to Malevich causes me to speculate on Wilson’s political idealism for art and society, which may be a current that persists through the *Discussions* that he has been conducting since 1972. *Red Square* also exposes a repressed linkage between two avant-garde periods: 1920s Russia and 1960s America. The linkage calls up the inhibited role that politics plays in avant-garde American art of the 1960s and has played since.

Wilson’s allusion to Malevich also calls to mind an important work of the minimalist artist Dan Flavin. In 1964, Flavin began a series titled “*monuments* for V. Tatlin,” an homage in fluorescent tubes to post-revolutionary Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1920).

Evoking constructivism through Tatlin and suprematism through Malevich raises two important points. Both movements rejected the idea of autonomous art in favour of the idea that art could serve as an instrument for social purpose. Wilson identified with Malevich’s goal of advancing art to its zero-degree point, the division between art and non-art. According to suprematist artist El Lissitzky, what is created at this point of division is “the ultimate illusion of irrational space, with its infinite extensibility into the background and foreground.” At this point, it is interesting to think about the way in which one experiences *Untitled (disc)* as an object that extends into the background and foreground of the exhibition space.

For Malevich, when art reaches the precipice of non-art, it is the “supremacy of pure feeling or perception” that is achieved and consciously experienced. The language of suprematism pervades the title of a number of Wilson’s *Discussion* topics, such as “The Pure Awareness of the Absolute,” which was held here at the Dia Art Foundation last month and in which I participated.

More complex to answer in the work of Wilson is the instrumental half of suprematism, that of art as a tool for social change. Arriving in New York as a young man from South Africa in the early 1960s, Wilson’s artistic career has to be considered in light of the time he spent growing up in a country led by a monstrous apartheid regime. His earliest memories, his earliest friendships, were formed in a place where questions of political freedom and human dignity continue to haunt today.
Wilson’s artistic career also has to be considered in light of the emergence of modern interpersonal communications theory (which, by the way, enabled anti-apartheid movements to publicize to the world what was taking place in South Africa). According to communications historians Robert L. Heath and Jennings Bryant, the 1960s saw scholars adopting “communication as the central term because they wanted to study it as a significant and unique aspect of human behavior.”5 Claude Shannon, often referred to as the father of communications theory, was a mathematician, electrical engineer, and cryptographer following the Second World War that astutely theorized the transition of telecommunications from analog to digital transmission systems. According to Cornell art historian Maria Fernandez, Shannon “understood communication exclusively as the replication in the receiver of the data pattern entered by the sender. From this perspective, the semantic content as well as the receiver’s interpretation of the message were irrelevant to communication.” That is, in communications theory, what is paramount in importance are the pathways of communications.

Now allow me to read to you a part of a 2002 interview between Ian Wilson and Dutch novelist Oscar van den Boogaard in which Wilson is asked whether he could speak about some of the content of a particular Discussion. In the interview, he iterates a view identical to Shannon:

Boogaard: I’ve forgotten what I asked you in Basel. Do you remember it?

Wilson: Yes, literally even, but I don’t want to talk about that, that would mean that we end up in the Discussion, and I only want to talk about the Discussion, about the technique, and not about the content. We need to make a distinction between the ideas of this interview and the ideas that take shape in a Discussion, because it is my experience that when the ideas are published it is always a disappointment, but when the ideas are formulated in the Discussion they are good. The actual content of the Discussions has to remain in the context of the Discussions themselves.6

Shannon’s concept of pure communication was of great interest to many artists working in the 1960s and ’70s, including Wilson as indicated by his assertion that “all art is information and communication.”7 An ascending view among artists of the 1960s and early 1970s, such as Robert Barry, James Lee Byars, Joseph Kosuth, Lygia Clark, Douglas Huebler, Valie Export, and others, was that the object form of art reduced the effectiveness of art due to the mediation of art by the object form. Even more problematic is the mediation of art by the object form’s


7 Daniel Marzona, Conceptual Art (Taschen, 2006), 92.
secondary status as commodity. For artists like Clark and Export, the silencing of women in a patriarchal society meant the prohibition of the woman’s body to communicate. Their work was often premised on speech through the active participation of the viewer, also employing performance as an act of recovery of their bodies from male mediation. *Body Tape* (1970) is a striking work by Export. With the accompaniment of intertitles, the artist explores the discourse of her body as a synecdoche for all women’s bodies via a series of sign-action transmissions.

James Lee Byars turned not only to his body through performance but the new communications medium of community access television. On 28 November 1968, he broadcast on live television *The World Question Center* as an expression of the empowerment of the questioner rather than those who provide answers. He asserted, by way of a question: “I can answer the question, but am I bright enough to ask it?” It is the interrogative that is important. Byars’s question implies a second important question, one regarding not who gets to speak but who is not being listened to.

The idea of an authentic sublation of autonomous art integrated into the praxis of life was one of the key concerns of artists of the conceptual art era. Given such concerns, representation posed an especially egregious problem since representation is, by definition, an act of mediation. For many artists, the turn to the body meant a turn to the site whence creativity and consciousness issues. Such a turn in art had its parallel within a developing countercultural society, which included the exploration of the mind through drugs and the adoption of Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism. I say this as the son of a Buddhist mother.

Wilson turned to the body, too. The bodies that participate in his *Discussions* are ones that think, listen, and speak. To dispense with material objects as the body gains self-understanding through the proximity with others in the search for an absolute awareness evokes for me a saying of the eleventh-century Chinese philosopher Shao Yong: “Forms can be split, but spirit cannot be split.”

In 1976, Wilson visited the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, then directed by Rudi Fuchs. From that point on, Wilson organized *Discussions* on a regular basis there until 1986. After 1986, *Discussions* were much more sporadically conducted although they continue to the present.

In the 1980s, Wilson experimented with the printed word and produced some series of books in which a single abstract word or short phrase, such as “unknowable,” “absolute knowledge,” or “perfect,” is repeated on every page. The repetition of the word or phrase takes on the effect of a mantra, which in Indian philosophies is a verbal sound considered capable of “creating spiritual transformation.” The sounds
are meant to engage the minds of both the one who chants as well as the one who listens.

Wilson has also produced a number of artist books, each simply titled *Section* followed by a number. The word “section” reminds me of how nations organize their constitutions according to “acts” and “sections.” During the apartheid government, Section 10 of the Natives Laws Amendment Act of 1952 outlined how all black South Africans had to be granted permission to reside in prescribed urban areas. Residency had to be permitted. It was not a right. And this residency was for the purpose of providing labour in industrial sectors of the society. Those who had received permission were referred to as “Section Tenners.” This permission was never permanent. It could be taken away at any time.

Linguistically, a section also always implies a pre-existing whole. A section can only be derived from a whole. Chapters have a different connotation in that they are like building blocks toward a whole. After all, a chapter can be incomplete while a section is always complete to the extent that it is a section. As such, naming his artist’s books *Section* followed by a number is homologically related to Buddhist or Hindu sutras, collections of canonical texts that were then assembled into a book of teachings.

Here is an excerpt from Wilson’s *Section 36* (1984), which plays on the binary of knowns and unknowns:

That which is unknown is not known. Not known, that which is unknown is not unknown. It is not known and not unknown. Not unknown, that which is unknown is not known and unknown. Not known and not unknown, that which is unknown is not known and unknown. That it is not known is not unknown, is unknown. That it is, is known. Not known and not unknown, the unknown is known. That it is not known and not unknown is known. That it is not known and not unknown is what is known. It is that which is not known and not unknown which is known of the unknown.

Veering close to tautological language, “that which is known and unknown is what is known” echoes the dilatational language of Eastern philosophies such as Hinduism and Buddhism, which sees conscious awareness leading to an understanding of an Absolute, which in turn leads to action as the core of what it means to be human. In Buddhism, those who know only the perceptible or knowable things without knowing the imperceptible or unknowable are deemed unenlightened by Buddha. Thus, “that which is known and unknown is what is known” are the words of a self-inquiring Ian Wilson on the path to enlightenment.
Now compare Wilson’s text from Section 36 with the following text from *Parabrahma Upanishad* as explained by Shri Datta Swami:

When the unimaginable nature of God is experienced through imaginable medium, it means that you have attained the knowledge of unimaginable nature of God. This does not mean that the unimaginable nature of God becomes imaginable. Knowledge of unimaginable nature means that the existence of unimaginable nature is detected or known. Without the knowledge there cannot be experience. The experience of unimaginable nature means only the knowledge of the existence of the unimaginable nature of God and in this point there is no possibility of the unimaginable nature becoming imaginable. Through the knowledge of the existence of the unimaginable nature of God, you have concluded the existence of unimaginable God in a specific medium. Here either in the stage of detection or in the stage of the result of detection, there is no possibility of knowing the unknowable nature of God. You can only know the existence of the unknowable God and this does not mean that you can know the unknowable nature of God.9

The language is akin. Opening oneself up to what is known and unknown evokes also the famous aphorism of Taoist philosopher Shen Dao that one should “abandon knowledge, discard self,” which is a call for humans to live life as it comes to you and not one prescribed by theory.

Let me turn to a quote by former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at a Department of Defense news briefing in 2002 on the subject of missing evidence linking the government of Iraq to the supply of weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups:

Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.10

Wilson’s words are not analogous to Rumsfeld’s, but they are structurally homologous, like an evil twin. Wilson is interested in knowing the Absolute through the opening-up of the Self to the infinitude that is life, while Rumsfeld was making the case for a frightening totality.
When I participated in Wilson’s most recent Discussion here at Dia last month, titled “The Pure Awareness of the Absolute,” I arrived about ten minutes early to find a group of people sitting in a circle that was approximate to the size of Wilson’s Chalk Circle on the Floor of 1968. This work now takes on new meaning for me as a spatial marker for a participatory dialogue in the round. It is no longer possible for me to see it exclusively as a reductivist gesture, for there is now always an accompanying image that I have of strangers seated together and opening up to one another through self-reflection.

Prior to the start of the Discussion, no one spoke to one another. The ambience was both hallowed and awkward, with some browsing their smartphones and others simply sitting in anticipation of the arrival of the artist. When Wilson did arrive, I found myself sitting to his immediate right. The session began with a series of questions in the manner of a Socratic inquiry:

Could we agree that there is an Absolute?

Can we agree that the Absolute can be experienced?

Can we agree we can be aware of experiencing the Absolute?11

And so on.

Again, it is the asking of questions that is important. Wilson’s use of the “we” is significant in that it implicated each one of us in what was being discussed. As people shared their thoughts, I could not help but study Wilson’s visage. He is a tall man with the cellophane skin of age. Lodged in his right ear was a hearing aid, which was always in view to me. The session was regularly punctuated by his request to whoever spoke to “speak up” since he had such difficulty hearing what was said. I was moved by his vulnerability and the earnestness of his pleas for people to allow him to hear what they had to say. He genuinely wanted to hear answers to questions that he knows cannot be answered with any certainty.

Toward the end of the Discussion, Wilson surprised me when he recounted a recent trip he made to Berlin. He said that he had always wanted to visit the Neue Nationalgalerie of Mies van der Rohe in Berlin. He said that he was sure that he would encounter the Absolute there because he believed that extreme aesthetic beauty could bring one to an experience of the Absolute. But he said that he was disappointed because, upon encountering the museum, he felt nothing. But then he said that he noticed a brother and sister at play in the open plaza that envelops Mies’s edifice. The brother was playing on a precarious ledge
and soon admonished by his mother for doing so. This caused the young boy to cry. Seeing his tears, his sister embraced him to console him. At that moment, Wilson said, he sensed the Absolute.

This story expresses some of the conflict at play between the ideals of art and the realities of the world, a conflict which has driven Wilson as far away from art as possible while yet remaining within it. In some respects, the story of his art is the story of his withdrawal from art.

But perhaps this is not so accurate. After all, here we are gathered in one of the art world’s great legitimating institutions participating in a presentation on the art of Ian Wilson. The story of his art is the story of the limits of art, the story of having doubts about art while still believing in art.

After the Discussion ended, I thought about how little it took for people to open themselves to one another. I thought about my beautiful wife and child, and how much I loved them. I thought about my love for my family as a kind of Absolute. I thought also of another circle in my life. When I began my art career, I would visit New York City as much as I could to take in the art world here. I often stayed with my grandmother who lived on Hester Street with five others. There were six adults, comprising my grandmother, my grandfather, my great-uncle, my uncle, and two aunts living together in a dilapidated one-bedroom. My great-uncle and grandfather worked in a Chinese sausage factory while the rest of my family, including my grandmother, worked in a sweatshop on the edge of Chinatown not far from SoHo. My grandmother was the boss of the household and she always larded me with as much support as she could give me whenever I visited. Last year, I accepted a job at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Soon after arriving in Philadelphia, I made a trip to New York. I was staying in a hotel near Seventh Avenue. I was looking for a place to eat when I felt that someone was watching. The feeling was so strong that I felt compelled to retrace my steps. Upon doing so I was shocked to discover a backlit photograph of my grandmother in the foyer of the UNITE HERE! labour union building.

UNITE HERE! is an acronym for two amalgamated unions: UNITE standing for the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees, and HERE standing for the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union. UNITE took over the formerly known International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, of which my grandmother was a part.

She led a hard life, moving from China to New York in the early 1960s (about the same time as Wilson), living with her family of six in a tiny apartment in a cockroach-infested tenement building in the Lower East Side, working in a Chinatown sweatshop, and passing away in 2005 at the age of 91.
It is difficult to know when the photograph of her was taken, but it looks as though she is in her late 60s or early 70s. She is depicted seated behind a sewing machine and wearing a favourite herringbone vest that she made and wore often. The portrait of her belies the hellish reality of what it was like to work in the sweatshop that she did. I remember going there with her as a boy and finding it almost impossible to breathe without a mask due to all the lint in the air. The air was intensely hot and humid, and the powerful electric fans providing relief did so at the cost of a loud and constant din. I remember seeing young mothers sewing with babies strapped to their backs while toddlers stood about idly, waiting for their mothers to finish their shifts.

I had my first solo exhibition in New York at Gallery Nature Morte at around the same time that my grandmother was photographed for the image that now hangs in the UNITE HERE! building. She surprised me at the opening by attending. I was chatting with some attendees when I heard her calling out my name in Cantonese. A crowd that had quickly formed around her near the entrance to the gallery obscured her.

She must have seemed like a novelty to this crowd, which was unaccustomed to encountering such a woman in this context. I could not believe that my grandmother (who spoke not a word of English) had managed to navigate herself from Chinatown to the East Village. I later learned that she had done so by showing the invitation card to strangers who simply pointed in the direction that she should go.

As I stood in the gallery in a state of disbelief, the crowd suddenly parted and my grandmother walked over to me. “What’s all this? Who are all these people?” she asked in Cantonese. These are two very good questions. I was speechless for a moment and then quickly responded in Cantonese. I felt a tremendous tenderness toward my grandmother. But I also felt utterly unmasked. I was unprepared for such a dramatic collision of worlds whereby an integral part of my identity (as exemplified by my grandmother) was put on view.

To be revisited by my dead grandmother so soon after my move to the East Coast was haunting. But it was also like a circle that has taken almost three decades to close. After I left Dia following the end of Wilson’s Discussion, I immediately went to 275 Seventh Avenue to offer my grandmother a Buddhist blessing.