



MUSEU  
D'ART CONTEMPORANI  
DE BARCELONA

The Museum devotes the first exhibition in Spain to one of the most essential and enigmatic artists of the late-20th century

## **Gil J Wolman, immortal and alive, at MACBA**

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**Title:** *Gil J Wolman. I am immortal and alive.* **Official opening:** Thursday, June 3, at 7.30 pm. **Dates:** from 4 June 2010 to 9 January 2011. **Curators:** Bartomeu Marí and Frédéric Acquaviva. Exhibition organised by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and coproduced with Fundação de Serralves - Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Porto.

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He invented the “mégapneumie”, poems of breath and pure sound, which he belched out at his legendary recitals in Paris. Also ‘Scotch art’, in which he mutilated and spoiled artworks in order to imbue them with new signs and meanings. He was a journalist, a revolutionary, a ship’s captain, a drug trafficker, a lorry driver, a barman and... an artist. In his own words, “Gil J Wolman, born in 1929, met a few people, took part in a few demonstrations, did a few things.” Later, he would say that: “Until 1949, before I met Isou [Isidore Isou, founder of Lettrism], I fed myself on poetry with words, and from that year on I fasted and passed from the letter to the breath, what I later called physical poetry.” Under the title *Gil J Wolman. I am immortal and alive*, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and Fundação de Serralves - Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Porto devote a major exhibition to one of the freest, most enigmatic and most discreet artists of the second half of the last century, one whose motto was always “the simpler, the more beautiful.” “Wolman has gone down in history too discreetly, as if he were an *illegal alien* in late-20th-century avant-garde art, an ever-present but unidentified, clandestine figure who emerged into the light at the beginning of a century he reached by virtue of being immortal and always alive”, write Bartomeu Marí and João Fernandes in the catalogue published to mark the occasion, and which also includes texts by Wolman himself, as well as pieces by Frédéric Acquaviva and Kaira M. Cabañas. The large number and high quality of the 250 works, documents and publications included in the exhibition – the first to be devoted to Wolman in Spain – make it a kind of encyclopaedia of Lettrism. The show, which opens first in Barcelona and will later travel to Porto, brings together Wolman’s most important, creative pieces, some seen here for the first time. Particularly interesting is *L’Anticoncept*, the film that Wolman conceived for projection onto a weather balloon and which was, for incomprehensible reasons, banned by the censors. Finally, on the occasion of this exhibition, MACBA will also present a performance of Wolman’s sound poetry.

The French artist Gil J Wolman (1929–1995) was a pioneer in researching the intersection and alteration of visual and textual languages. This show, the first monographic exhibition of Wolman's work ever held in Spain, consists of about 250 works and documents, from *L'Anticoncept* (1951) to *Voir de mémoire* (1995). It includes the artist's most important and fertile pieces, some of them never before exhibited.

Wolman was an outstanding member of Lettrism, an artistic and intellectual movement that he joined early on. Created in the mid-1940s by the Rumanian-Parisian artist Isidore Isou, Lettrism was based on the early twentieth-century Dadaist and Futurists movements. It maintained that the expressive heights of all artistic languages (poetry, music, painting and so forth) had already been reached. A stagnant historical moment had arrived where anything produced by classic means, even by violating those means, was doomed to repetition or decadence. In order to initiate a new creative cycle, it was necessary, first and foremost, to go back to the beginnings, to deconstruct artistic languages. This meant a return to signs emptied of their semantic weight, that is, a return to letters.

As uninterpreted symbols and sounds, letters are the basic elements of poetic creation; they could be, indeed had to be, combined in new ways. Thus, Lettrist poetry was purely formal. New syntheses between writing and the visual arts were explored; in film, which Isou deemed an art 'too rich, obese,' sound and image were separated or new meanings were given to works by other authors; in photography, images were painted on... Works of art or consumption by others were appropriated, grafted, mutilated, adulterated, undermined and given new contents, signs and meanings.

### **The Lettrist revolution**

On the basis of this seminal, iconoclastic and revolution thesis, Isou, Wolman and their peers produced copiously. In 1952, the Lettrist International was founded, a splitter movement led by Guy Debord (whose Situationist Movement and book *Society of the Spectacle* would exercise great influence on the protest movements in the following decades) and Gil J Wolman. Debord and Wolman posited extending the Lettrist revolution to a criticism of social and political life, and to personal commitment with what they called 'a sufficiently new way of living life itself'. After a few years, and for reasons never explained, Debord expelled Wolman from the movement.

Due to the number and quality of the works, documents and publications included in this exhibition, it is a sort of encyclopaedia of Lettrism. The exhibition consists of four parts. First, the film *L'Anticoncept*, made the same year (1951) as Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, with which it has a certain affinity. Whereas Isou's film is based on the Lettrist technique of 'discrepant editing' in which sound and image are not aligned, *L'Anticoncept* is projected onto a weather balloon placed in front of the theatre's curtain, rather than on a traditional screen. The image comes on and off, with the black and the white alternating intermittently and with different rhythms, and the sound consists of poems, brief reflections and syncopated texts falsely sung. The film was banned by the French censors; its screening at the Cannes Film Festival the month after it was completed was only open to the press. Like Debord's 1952

film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for Sade), Wolman's film rejects iconographic narration and effects a strict application of Lettrist notions about film.

The second part of the exhibition focuses on the period when Wolman, Debord, Jean-Louis Brau and Serge Berna separated from Isou's group to form the Lettrist International (1952–57), a dress rehearsal, so to speak, for Guy Debord's Situationist International (1957–72). During those years, Wolman and Debord wrote the manual *Mode d'emploi du détournement*. *Détournement* (detour) is the Lettrist technique of altering and undermining the meaning of deliberately plagiarised material. Wolman put into practice the manual's instructions in the *détournée* novel entitled *J'écris propre* (1956). The novel predates by a few years both Brion Gysin and William Burroughs's first collaborative experiments with the *Cut-Up* method and Debord's *Mémoires*. In 1956, he participated – along with Asger Jorn and Pinot-Gallizio – in the First World Congress of Artists in Alba, Italy.

In 1959, Wolman resumed his research in the visual arts with Brau, after producing, in 1952, *Un homme saoul en vaut deux* ('A drunk man is worth two'), a title that makes a pun on the French words *seul* (alone) and *saoul* (drunk), and his eight *Métagraphies* (1954). Later, Wolman was associated with other Lettrist expressions and exhibited his striking Lettrist paintings at the Galerie Weiller in 1961.

### **'Scotch art'**

In the next room are the 'Scotch art' compositions (produced by means of a procedure that consists of tearing strips of printed paper and taping them to wood or canvas) that were shown at the Galerie Valérie Schmidt in 1964, 1966 and 1968.

In 1964, during a group show at the Galerie Stadler, Wolman once again broke with the Lettrists and, along with Brau and François Dufrêne, founded the almost virtual Second Lettrist International. Largely alone, in the following years (indeed, through the mid-1970s) he pursued his 'Scotch art' pieces, working with major newspaper headlines, as well as the contents and images to which they referred, to present alternative discourses, undermining, violating or revealing the language, logic and discourse of the mass media.

The fourth and last section of the exhibition deals with the works related to the 'separatist movement' that Wolman created in 1977; he was the movement's sole member. In search of simplicity ('the more simple, the more beautiful,' he used to say), he limited himself to splitting objects in two, without greater aesthetic concerns.

In the 1980s and until his death in 1995, he resumed writing, publishing some twenty books including smaller editions at his Éditions Inconnues. He also shot about ten videos, some of which are presented in this exhibition: in 1981, *Le Drame discret de Mitterrand* (a back-and-forth between Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and the Socialist Party candidate's swearing in as president); in 1990, *L'Anticoncept à New York*, a hallucinatory critical revision of *L'Anticoncept*, filmed from the screen looking out at the audience. He partially covers with white canvas oil paintings bought at flea markets (*Peintures fermées*, 1989) or he conceals parts of those paintings (*Peintures cachées*, 1987). He also exhibited works that he later burned in order to exhibit the memory of the paintings in the form of

frames empty except for the title... These are some of the techniques and creative resources used to reformulate the questions that had concerned him since the beginning of his career: the nature of the relation between the word and the image, on the one hand, and the world, on the other.

● **CATALOGUE:** To mark this exhibition, the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) has produced a catalogue, entitled *Gil J Wolman. I am immortal and alive*, with texts by Frédéric Acquaviva, Kaira M. Cabañas and Gil J Wolman. Two editions: Catalan/Spanish and English.

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## ***Gil J Wolman. I am immortal and alive***

**Official opening:** Thursday, June 3 at 7.30 pm.

■ **MACBA.** Plaça dels Àngels, 1. 08001 Barcelona. [www.macba.cat](http://www.macba.cat)

■ **TIMES:** Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, from 11 pm to 7.30 pm; Saturdays, from 10 am to 8 pm; Sundays, from 10 am to 3 pm; Tuesdays except holidays, closed. From June 25 to September 23, Thursdays and Fridays, open until midnight. Guided tours daily.

■ **PERFORMANCE OF SOUND POETRY BY GIL J WOLMAN** (Friday, June 4 at 6 pm). 60 minutes of radical experiment based on the expressive power of the voice and sound amplification. Introduced by Frédéric Acquaviva. MACBA rooms. Admission with ticket to the museum. Places limited.

■ **RADIO WEB MACBA.** Monograph on Gil J Wolman and his milieu by Frédéric Acquaviva (coming soon to <http://rwm.macba.cat>).

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MACBA Press and Protocol Service:  
Tels.: (00 34) 93 481 33 56 and 93 481 47 17  
Email: [press@macba.cat](mailto:press@macba.cat)