

CRAIG F. STARR GALLERY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

JOHN WILLENBECHER: WORKS FROM THE 1960S

On view at Craig F. Starr Gallery
5 October 2021 – 15 January 2022



Left: *Unknown Game #3*, 1963. Wood, glass, found objects, paint, metal, and gold leaf. 27 1/2 x 18 x 4 inches.

Right: *Double Uranograph #1*, 1967. Wood, glass, found objects, and paint. 16 7/8 x 16 7/8 x 7 inches.

NEW YORK – Craig F. Starr Gallery is pleased to present ***John Willenbecher: Works from the 1960s***. On view 5 October 2021 through 15 January 2022 in our fourth-floor gallery, the exhibition will showcase ten box constructions and six related works on paper from 1962-67. Most of these seminal works are being shown publicly for the first time. This show marks the artist's first exhibition in New York in almost two decades and is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with an introduction by Dan Cameron, a New York based curator and art critic.

A self-taught artist, John Willenbecher (b. 1936) initially set out to be an art historian. After three years of graduate studies at NYU's institute of fine arts followed by six months of travel in Europe, Willenbecher returned to New York resolved, instead, to become an artist. Seeing *The Art of Assemblage*, a groundbreaking exhibition curated by William C. Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, solidified his determination.

Willenbecher's earliest works were greatly inspired by Joseph Cornell, and those compositions developed into the game-like constructions that landed Willenbecher his first exhibition in 1963 at Feigen+Herbert, New York. Donald Judd, reviewing the show, said "The sorts of meaning Willenbecher is dealing with are interesting. Insofar as art is philosophical this is relevant, believable philosophy, which, since it is in the art, takes art."¹ At least two works from this debut exhibition are

¹ Judd, Donald. Arts Magazine Oct. 1963, page 56.

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on view in *John Willenbecher: Works from the 1960s* – the exhibition features seven of these related constructions all made between 1962-64.²

Like so many artists of this time, Willenbecher turned to the New York City streets and junk shops to mine materials for his “unknown games.”³ Painted in black, white, and shades of greys, many of the found objects that comprise the wall mounted, constructions are readily identifiable, like ABC blocks, Christmas tree balls, and wooden chair spindles. Willenbecher preferred materials “whose existences prior to his spotting them would still be detectable in their revamped state” as Cameron points out in his essay.

Two highlights of this exhibition, *Game with Sixteen Balls* (1962) and *Unknown Game #3*, also include gold leafed letters “LYRI” and “PANSA” respectively. The latter was included in the influential 1964 exhibition *Boxes* at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles. In the text for the exhibition catalogue Walter Hopps wrote:

"Willenbecher's Game Boxes are not to be played. . . . A game implies activity;
Willenbecher's severely reductive aesthetic achieves mystery by allowing none."

Willenbecher's style evolved in the second half of the decade. His sculptures became sleeker, and he introduced a wider spectrum of color in his body of work. This is represented in the show with a dual-sided piece titled *Double Uranograph #1* (1967), which is shown alongside six ink and acrylic works on paper that highlight the artist's skills as a draftsman.

In conjunction with the exhibition, Craig F. Starr Gallery will present a selection of Willenbecher's monotypes in the Fall 2021 online edition of the International Fine Print Dealers of America Fair, which will run 15-31 October. These unique prints from 1962-63 were made using ABC blocks that can be found in several of the early constructions and often include hand painted additions.

Willenbecher was born in Macungie, PA and lives and works in New York City. His works can be found in the permanent collections of important museums including: the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, CA; the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; The Art Institute of Chicago, IL; the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

Craig F. Starr Gallery is located at 5 East 73rd Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. Gallery hours are 11am to 5:30pm, Monday through Saturday. Press inquiries and image requests can be made by calling the gallery at 1-212-570 or emailing info@craigstarr.com. For general information, please visit the gallery's website at craigstarr.com.

² Since there is no existing checklist from the 1963 Feigen+Hebert exhibition, a works inclusion was determined by examining the installation photos.

³ Levin, K. "John Willenbecher." *ARTnews*. V. 62. October 1963, p. 15.