

# Art Review:

## *Other People and Their Ideas*

Interview by Tom Eccles

### *No 2: Liam Gillick*

*Liam Gillick is a British artist who represented Germany at the 2009 Venice Biennale. A survey show of his work, From 199A to 199B, is on show at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson until 21 December*

#### TOM ECCLES

*You've just completed two major projects, From 199A to 199B: Liam Gillick (a survey of your works from the 1990s) at Bard's Hessel Museum and To the Moon via the Beach (a large-scale curatorial project with Philippe Parreno and others in the Roman amphitheatre) in Arles. Both share similar artistic strategies of creating a framework of a platform in which collaborative actions can take place. The project in Arles also involved many of the artists with whom you've worked and been associated with since the 1990s. Besides scale, what do you consider as significant changes since that time?*

#### LIAM GILLICK

There are changes that are explicit and others that are implicit. The explicit ones are connected to the shifting economics and structural components of the art context. One aspect that is somewhat overlooked is a rise in instrumentalisation of advanced art where public or foundation funding is involved - that biases towards 'good works' that may appear to be responsive or open to 'the public'. Of course, from the beginning we were all very aware of the difference between a public and an audience. There is an audience for anything, but dealing with a layered, multiple and complex public is another question altogether. This issue of instrumentalisation is much more problematic to deal with than simple pseudoethical anxieties about markets - which are easy to identify and deconstruct. This is the main difference from the early 1990s, where the idea of working together on a project

basis towards the exposure of the machinations of the emerging 'stakeholder' culture had much more urgency. Surprisingly, scale is not such a big difference - *The Trial of Pol Pot* (1998) that Philippe Parreno and I presented at Le Magasin in Grenoble was also a large-scale project. The thing that remains is an interest in production rather than consumption. I think a lot of misunderstanding around the work is based on a false conception of its claims. There was no claim to critique capital by reproducing the softer edges of participatory forms. The work was an exposure of how meaning is produced and what forms and structures offer potential to produce new critical tools. Again - production rather than consumption. I think this is also clear in *To the Moon via the Beach*. An exhibition that was centred on a desire to find new models of production. 'Collaboration' was a word we always tried to overcome - with its images of people sitting side-by-side and brainstorming around a table. The structure was much closer to the Factory Records model, where people worked semiautonomously in response to a conceptual structure. There is no smoothness or shared role-playing to this, but a dynamic relationship to curatorial developments - both a resistance to them and an exploitation of the tensions produced by them.

*Let's start with the first point: The difference between audience and public. If I understand you correctly, you're saying that a museum (or any art space with government or foundation support) now finds itself in the predicament of presenting projects to a notional public much broader (and you say more complex) than*

*previously. In fact a large number of people with little knowledge about the specifics of art. Besides the economic interests of increased ticket sales and the desire for popular acclaim, can you pinpoint other factors at play in this shift and say how it has affected artists of your generation?*

**LG** It is clear that the discussion used to be about audience. When I first started exhibiting work, there was a lot of talk about finding an audience for an artist's work. We were more interested in a postmodern awareness that it is always possible to create an audience for anything - but not so easy to deal with multiple publics that take part in developed cultural life. My concern was not so much about the notion of a broad public, but of a fractured and layered public. The classic neo-avant-garde position was to project the semiautonomous function of art within a context of education and protection. By the time I started to exhibit work, I questioned this position. I was not alone - the first generation of new curators also wanted to play with hierarchies. Not the traditional late-modern concern with breaking down hierarchies within art per se, but in terms of who speaks and to whom, meaning that we were all interested in taking possession of the mediating functions of art - specifically, I remain as interested in playing with the exhibition context as I do with the 'works' in the exhibition. The Museum is the last part of this process and is now being fought over in the same way we fought over the kunstvereins and centres d'art in the 1990s.

*Unlike many artists of your generation coming out of London in the early 1990s, you seem to have an avid, knowledgeable and engaged audience for your work and ideas (and not necessarily a small audience), but you don't really address a public per se.*

**LG** I am extremely interested in the difference between an audience and a public. Of course I have produced quite a lot of large scale works that occupy public space. But in these cases I have generally been interested in what we might call the disinterested viewer. People who happen to pass a building every day - who work or live in close proximity to the work. Most artist who appear to have a 'public' actually deploy techniques of public relations and self-promotion - to the extent that employing people to make sure they appear in the press. I am not sure this means they have a public, but that they have a publicist. There is a big difference.

*There is. And you seem on occasion to deliberately taunt the press and public. Your show at the MCA Chicago in 2009 got headlines like 'prepare to be confused.' and your German pavilion at the Venice Biennale of the same year was equal cause for 'befuddlement'. I've even seen commentators argue that the viewer should ignore your press releases. At the entrance to the Bard exhibition is a text that reads (in German!) 'So were people this dumb before television?' For someone who has so astutely thought through the manipulative*

*strategies of power, you do seem to adopt a rather aggressively resistant position.*

**LG** An important component of contemporary art is its critical potential. I cannot account for journalists and their frustrations. As my work is not about sex or death, it is sometimes difficult to address by a mainstream that carries a fantasy idea of artistic persona and a love of titillation. I am not interested in the consolidation of form and content. I am involved in a series of parallel structures that cannot be resolved. Having said that, I think some mainstream frustration with the work is political - there are clear ideologies expressed through mainstream criticism that refuses to 'see' certain things that would undermine their position. And I am not the only person treated this way. It seems that the only politics acceptable in contemporary work is that which is extremely didactic. Of course didacticism is not the limit of the political. I reject transparency as a middle-ground conspiracy.

*Another textwork in the exhibition states: 'the significance of this structure is still dependent upon structures outside which I am too lazy to challenge.' It's true, funny and tragic. At least in my case. In February next year you will deliver the prestigious Bampton lectures at Columbia University, which puts you in the company of Lewis Mumford, Anthony Blunt and Archbishop Demetrios. Is this the moment where criticality might give way to the presentation of, say, a more philosophical or at least political position?*

**LG** I have spent the summer attempting to think about what to present. I have written a number of texts in the past few years that addressed various structural aspects of art: Abstraction; modes of work, labor and life; collaboration; and the state of contemporary art. I don't want to go much further with this at the moment. I am tired of listening to clumsy pseudoacademic presentations around contemporary work. One of the problems of this approach is that there ends up being too much focus on recuperation and reiteration, as these are two aspects of art that can be independently verified. I want to address the underlying structures of the main projects I have worked on over the last 20 years. This means - it will be less a series of lectures about art and more a series of lectures about what actually took/takes place in order to lead towards the possibility of art. Or more accurately, the way art still exists as a problem and an enduring human activity that is essentially connected to refusal and reinvention rather than classification and judgement. I will attempt to do this by talking about the kinds of social and political structures that have been at the heart of the work.

*Your name is invoked alongside two of the vaguest and most misrepresented terms of the last 20 years: 'relational aesthetics' and institutional critique'. Shedding those categorisations, alongside the constant description of you as a 'conceptual artist', appears to have a particular urgency right now. You're at the point*

*where building structures, whether physical, social, educational or intellectual, seems both possible and important to you. It also means a level of responsibility in thinking through your role as an artist and public intellectual. Am I right in thinking this presents a kind of junction in the road for you?*

**LG** You are probably right. In the past I have fought quite hard to retain a space of semiautonomy in relation to the systems of nomination. I pretty much gave up when someone wrote 'conceptual artist' on my wikipedia page. It was the final straw of idiocy and cultural amnesia. The biggest problem however is not the issue of what phantom group people try and place you within but the frequent description that there is the work and then there is design, and music, and architecture, and writing and so on. Of course these are all aspects of my art practice - I don't make objects and do other things as well. This attempt to separate these different aspects of the work is an essentially conservative desire to make sure that the implications of certain practices remain closed and subject to historically fixed processes of analysis and control. I am not the only artist who suffers from this. Strangely this results in an occasional desire on my part to articulate and emphasise the potential of art and the idea of the artist while simultaneously trying to undermine such positions. There is a deep rupture in the work that cannot be resolved. A desire to keep alive the potential of an abstraction that can function outside standard systems of validation but remain specific rather than make universalist claims. At the same time, I want to engage with the context in ways that have function and a use-value. These two aspects of the work have always existed and have very little to do with participation or institutional critique - although there was a recognition of the both right from the very first exhibition I did, in 1989, where a Karsten Schubert in London I produced boxes of building-facade designs. I was in the middle of a period of designing hundreds of buildings a day. At the opening the printouts were passed around and the only other thing on display was the boxes themselves.

*I like your idea of art existing as a problem and as an 'enduring human activity that is essentially connected to refusal and reinvention'. How do you square such thoughts with the fact that you are also willing to undertake commissions with major corporations and even the Home Office in London? Last year you designed a line of 'weekend and clutch bags, wallets and an iPad holder' for Pringle. Is it rather like Marx and Engels playing the stock market or is something else at play.*

**LG** For every project you mention, there are ten that involve a collaboration or an ad hoc setup or an attempt at an autonomous project. As with dichotomies in the physical work itself, you have to understand my engagement with different social structures as an unresolvable set of parallels. It is interesting that you don't mention my design of the logo for the journal ...ment or my work on

the e-flux readers, or any of my other commissions with no corporations I work on. Like most engaged artists I know, I am interested in things other than art. Specifically I have always been involved in what we could call 'the semiotics' of the built world'. In order to find out anything, I have always been interested in an implicated position. I am not sure how we could effectively develop a pure ethics of exchange in relation to the production of cultural work, but I am absolutely convinced that we won't find out anything if we separate completely from the complex of contemporary sociopolitical structures. I am too working-class to retire to the academy or do charity work. I want to be critically engaged in structures such as government bureaucracy and even fashion, otherwise the writing and the projects I have been involved in are pure fantasy or conjecture, completely disconnected from the reality of production and exchange. I am concerned as much about the instrumentalisation of public, foundation and higher education funding as I am about the idea of the exchange of a singular work of art between one 'visionary' producer and one 'visionary' consumer. The most recent body of work, which occupied me for the past seven years, addressed the question of what happens when you have a crisis in culture beyond crisis. Starting in 2005 I began to examine the northern European consensus structure of work and production derived from postwar social-democratic models. Every time I step out into an engaged project it feeds my research and my understanding of how certain structures function, and allows me to develop a critical position. There is a fundamental misunderstanding surrounding how to read most contemporary art - an assumption that art is a critique of commodity status of the object that can never be fully understood or developed as long as the focus remains on consumption and various ironic responses to that - it is clear to me that we actually have to think much harder about production than consumption.

*I'm not sure if I agree with you. But then again, you once said to me 'All your influences are dead.' The project in Arles this summer for the LUMA foundation, To the Moon via the Beach focused on production over public presentation, exhibition or audience (or rather the 'public' in your terms). Around 20 artists (including Klara Lidén, Pierre Huyghe, Douglas Gordon, Pilvi Takala, Anri Sala and Uri Aran) were essentially engaged in the creation of work within a public space. But there was no publicly announced schedule or traditional opening events. There was a palpable tension between our commonplace expectations of large-scale exhibitions and what ultimately unfolded over a period of days. How would you judge the success of failure of such a project?*

**LG** Which bit don't you agree with? It cannot be denied that the focus of most developed art since the early 1970s has in some way dealt primarily with the reception of the work and not the production of the work. It was a period full of 'series' of work, appropriation of images, super-subjectivity, distancing devices and above all irony

All intended to reduce or remove the author - or at least question the author - while still producing discrete artworks for consideration. Most mainstream criticism remains obsessed with the price or importance of art at its moment of reception or exchange - with the more tasteful critics merely creating an ethical mirror by lauding the marginal, overlooked or cheap. What we did in the early 1990s was to look again at more dynamic moments historically and reintroduce working processes that made it much more difficult to know where the 'art moment' might be. Look at all the confusion over esthétique relationnelle. Most attempts to critique it were still obsessed with identifying the artwork itself and not the 'work' that constitutes the art - getting hung up on an ethics of materials and imagined engagement with a 'real' public. When I said to you that 'all your influences are dead', I was identifying a complex situation for all of us. The key postwar - primarily French - thinkers are dead, apart from Badiou and Ranciere. Meillassoux, who has something to say about poetry, and many of us looked towards the post-1968 Italians - but we are in a period when the key postwar philosophical and sociological figures have departed.

With Arles we played with the fact that there was a guaranteed 'public' rather than creating an 'audience'. We know now that it is possible to do some kind of biennale or event structure just about anywhere and bring in a specific set of people to discuss its relevance or potential. In Arles we made use of the site itself as a historical locus that draws people to it for many reasons. Locals come because it is theirs. Tourists come because it is a place to see. Some art people came because of who was involved. We reckon that we had 1,000 people come a day without attempting to attract a specific art-audience for an event moment. So in many ways it had this base level involvement. What was important for me is for those people not to be lectured to and told how important Pierre Huyghe or how young Elvire Bonduelle is - but instead to experience the work itself within a site that already carries its own potential and limitations. The success was that it could take place at all and that all the artists involved could work on different levels - many using the place as a site of production. We wanted to present art and artists to a public who were not primed for the experience and on that level it worked.

*Sorry, for a moment I thought you were talking about the political economy in general rather than specifically about the art world. I think your work does make larger claims, though, and therein lie many of its challenges to understanding and reception. To treat it as say we might a painting or a sculpture would be to miss the point entirely.*