**in conversation**

**Liam Gillick**

with William Corwin

William Corwin sat down with Liam Gillick to discuss a recipe for creating public art that is neither grandiose, kitschy, nor dismissive of the public; the responsibilities of the contemporary curator; and the joys of lying face down on the floor. Gillick currently has an exhibition at Casey Kaplan (May 2 – June 23) and will have a survey at Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College’s Center for Curatorial Studies this summer (June 23 – December 21) titled *From 199A to 199B.*

**William Corwin (Rail):** Your survey *Three Perspectives and a short scenario* took place at four geographically separate institutions. Could you talk about the thinking behind a multi-city, multi-part retrospective?

**Liam Gillick:** After a while artists start to view time in relation to their work slightly strangely—in a way that’s out of sync with how it’s received. So, to me it feels like that project already took place quite a while ago and was part of a very different mentality than my concerns right now. I tend to view exhibitions that way: as an extension of the state of mind you’re in when you are immersed in a project rather than when or where it was.

But that particular exhibition did give a strong indication of the way I work. It was part of an attempt to do a retrospective that moved across a number of cities. The exhibition started in Rotterdam, moved to the Kunsthalle in Zurich, made a pause in Munich at the Kunstverein, and ended up in Chicago. In each location the idea was to create a new structure rather than bring together old work. Within the structural design of the exhibition I created a plan that would allow me to give half of each space back to the institution and make it their responsibility to deal with the implications of that—to take responsibility for the actions. I was trying both to implicate the institution and to show something about my approach to working.

In each case, the venue decided to treat their obligation differently. In Rotterdam, they thought it would be interesting to reanimate and replay some very early work I’d done, which tended to be participatory. In Chicago, the idea was to have a discussion together about what to do. In the end we did something that was integrated within the fabric of the building. So you had this strange sense of a very strong framework combined with a clear decision by the institution. There were two final components: a big display case that moved to each venue that had a lot of ephemera in it, bits and pieces I’d worked on that couldn’t be accounted for in any grand narrative—editions, little books, posters, and bits and pieces that were given a very prominent position—and a big projected Apple Keynote PowerPoint type thing that read like a big hi-def movie, in which you could see the development of my work, images of work fading into each other over time. As you saw each image in turn, a story started to build on top of them; a text gradually emerged on the screen. I wrote the overlaid text in real time as I put together the Keynote; it was started to build on top of them; a text gradually emerged on the screen. I wrote the overlaid text in real time as I put together the Keynote; it was a story about alternative models of production and work. In the exhibition as a whole I was trying to account for all these different aspects of my work simultaneously: the institutional aspect, the things that cannot be explained away, and the way everything I have done has an intimate connection with writing.

**Rail:** How did you feel taking a passive role in the curation of your work? Did you come to loggerheads with any of the people you were working with?

**Gillick:** No, it’s the opposite—I gave them back fifty percent of the exhibition. I gave it to them as a gift.

**Rail:** Were you happy to see what they did with it?

**Gillick:** Well, I wanted to make it a problem for them. I wanted them to take responsibility for having invited me to do something. Three out of the four curators I had worked with a few times over the years. But I was trying to avoid this binarism that develops over time, the question of whether the artist is “happy” or “sad” or doing something in an appropriate way. I wanted to turn the problem away from the artist-centric perspective and make it their issue. I think it worked extremely well; there were cases where it didn’t concern me what they were up to. For example in Zurich throughout the duration of the exhibition they re-enacted various moments in my early work, often quite simple things, that often just involved gathering together certain things and leaving them lying around. Then they would clear up and do another work. And, you know, I think they did it better than if I’d done it myself. I think there is a lot of misunderstanding about intentionality in relation to art, a lot of automatic assumptions about the kind of autonomous artistic figure, but I’m from a generation that really started to work a lot with curators as part of a new sort of formulation or...
new set of relationships. I occasionally want to turn that back onto that
easy collaborative flow. Yet I don't want everything to be a kind of easy
thing that's somehow always just about sitting side by side and working
out what to do; I wanted to sort of turn the problem a little bit. The
curators I worked with all seemed very happy to take over their part of
the exhibition, which told you a lot about the power dynamics we have
developed over time.

RAIL: I'd like to focus on the work itself, though I understand that the
presentation and curation of the exhibition are vital aspects of the
discourse of your work—a transition from the macro to the micro to
speak. What are you presenting this May at Casey Kaplan, and then
this summer at Bard?

GILLCICK: But the retrospective was also the work. The exhibition itself is also
the work. And with each presentation I have to rethink the relationships
and the way the exhibition can be a site for the continued development of
ideas rather than just showing off the latest "works." There is no concrete
division between curating something and working on something—even
when I work alone. Artists have always curated themselves if no one
else is around. The two upcoming shows are perfect examples of this.
For Casey Kaplan I am at the beginning of something. I recently closed
an exhibition at Eva Presenhuber gallery in Zurich which introduced a
new project that came out of reading Karl Marx's incomplete comic
novel, Skorpion und Felix, that was written when he was 19 and maybe
thought he could be Laurence Sterne. I am continuing this work at
Casey's in May. It will introduce some new forms and invert the normal
way I have been deploying graphic work in relation to my own impeded
abstraction. For Bard I was invited to develop an exhibition that might
make sense in relation to the 20th anniversary of the Curatorial Studies
program there. I am showing work from the 1990s—the exhibition is
titled 1994 – 1998—and it will bring together work that required a strong
curatorial context to function. There are a lot of misunderstandings about
participatory art of that period. And this exhibition will show that there
was much more of an institutional consciousness at work rather than an
attempt to entertain or hang out with the public, as it were. I am working
with current students and alumni. It will be extremely interesting to see
how this works. Curatorial self-consciousness has increased a great deal
in the last 20 years—whether you like it or not. From the beginning I
worked alongside some of the first curatorial graduates in Europe. They
were skeptical of the given system and created the groundwork for the
dynamic situation you find today. The works at Bard are from the early
point of this meeting between artists and the new curators. It was an
interesting moment where people were working out where they stood.
It produced profound disagreements but many times a fierce coalition
of interests between curator and artist in the face of intrinsically muis-
ums and institutions that didn't want to change and had no interest in
examining their strange working methods.

RAIL: What is your relation with public art; how do you feel about present-
ing art in the public sphere where it can be viewed very passively by
the public, perhaps not necessarily in a very intense way?

GILLCICK: Most public art is the realization of a kind of accommodation
between public and private funding—that's just one of those compro-
mises that's developed in post-industrial countries. Meaning there's an
obligation on the part of people who are building things to put some
spaces, and I do not view it in the traditional way. I treat it with skepticism,
not a grip on that. The problem with a lot of these projects is that everyone
doing art in the public sphere where it can be viewed very passively by the
work; I'm curious why a decision was made, why these places are viewed as
appropriate. I think this is a realm that isn't completely sorted out yet. It's
still a relatively recent phenomenon, and the thing that's really shocking
is the way that the work is not being addressed in a hardcore way by a
new generation of curators, despite the amount of resources that are
available, because of legal and bureaucratic constraints. People sit around,
and quite understandably complain about a lack of resources. But if you
look around at the amounts of money sloshing around for these kinds of
private/public projects, you'll see that the possibility of allocating that
money differently really still has to be addressed. Someone still has to get
a grip on that. The problem with a lot of these projects is that everyone
is interested in cultures that commit to the problem of art in public
spaces, and I do not view it in the traditional way. I treat it with skepticism,
but I'm not as harsh as I might be about other things. I've spent quite
a lot of time in Mexico. There's quite a lot of public art in Mexico City in
particular and there is a tradition of abstraction in public places. But you
go somewhere like New Hampshire, you might get to a rotary traffic system
and there will be like a kitschy thing in the middle. But I'm not going
to treat it with the same level of critical awareness that I might have for
an exhibition at 303 Gallery or the Whitney Biennial. I'm curious about
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GILLCICK: Can you say which project this is?

RAIL: That's all right.

GILLCICK: In order to work in a productive way, with an architect, a city, or
just a group of people, I tend to keep it all to myself until it's completed.
I don't allow, for example, anyone to use computer renderings of a project
until it is done, as I don't trust that aspect of contemporary planning.
Of course, this baffles a lot of agencies, corporations, cities, universities,
because they often assume that artists just want to be visible. 'They're
often a bit surprised that I'm the one insisting, "No, let's not use any
renderings, let's not put out any drawings into the world, let's not do
anything like that unless it's a real relationship." What we call public art
is not outside of the theoretical framework that I'm normally involved in;
it's just one aspect of it—the oral exam version, as it were, of theoretical
calculation. And as with the oral exam, sometimes you turn out to be
much smarter than they thought, or much dumber. That's why I quite
like doing these projects. I'm very interested in the idea of what I call
the distracted viewer. I'm a distracted viewer myself; I'm not interested
so much in these supposedly deep levels of engagement that people
fantasize about. I want things to exist as a backdrop, as a distraction
that may sometimes become effective because of the moment or the
context, not because they have an aura or address something false and
pseudo-profound. What you don't often see is the adjustment and the
reorganization of a building that has been a result of my input during
the architectural process. For something I'm working on right now in
Scandinavia, they are changing the way the building meets the ground
in order to make the work I want to do possible, and I would say that is
actually a component of the artwork. I know damn well it's going to be
pretty hard to get the city to explain that the way this building meets
the ground is a component of the artwork. It's going to be too abstract
to describe. But that's part of my involvement in a way. It will alter the
public experience of the building.

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GILLCICK: I'd rather not. [Laughs.]

RAIL: Can you say which project this is?
Gillick: Art
Rail: Who are you talking about?
Gillick: One of the things that’s interesting about your background is you had an activist impulse of starting up a printing house—creating projects that were then disseminated by the artists themselves. I’d like to talk about your beginnings in London, in the period of the so-called Y.B.A.s, when artists and curators often didn’t get paid, they just produced.
Gillick: It’s difficult to talk about these things in clear terms. Certainly it’s very, very difficult to make any kind of statement about an ethics of production in relation to young artists, and I’ve worked with a lot of them since I’ve been in New York. You should never muddle up ethical positions with lack of money. Artists need to get paid for their labor like anyone else. That’s not the same as talking about art sounds a little more down to earth when they say it?
Gillick: No, not at all, completely the opposite. There had been earlier interesting moments, like St. Martins, where Anthony Caro taught, and very good people had come through there, like Barry Flanagan, Richard Long, and Gilbert and George, for example. But their positions came from a reaction against the late-modern orthodoxy of Caro’s belief systems and his way of teaching. If we were French we would say that Goldsmiths was a post ’68 kind of school. The teachers were people who had been in their 20s in the late ’60s and were more of the generation of Richard Long and Gilbert and George. There wasn’t one dogmatic position that was forced upon students. It was an open framework that was based on asking questions instead of reinforcing an orthodoxy. It was also a time of intense class reorganization; some classes were seeing the opportunity to enter higher education for the first time.

The Goldsmiths environment was affected by three things: the first of which being a very democratized belief system which held that it was possible for anyone to be an artist. The idea was never to seek out talent or quality, although there was a sense that something should be interesting rather than uninteresting. There was a lot of discussion around the question of being interesting in the world versus being interesting in the context of art, and whether there was a difference. So there was a lot of applied philosophy, thinking about the nature of objects and how they get value. The other two things that were really crucial were the class clash and a big North/South divide. In the U.S. there are enormous differences in class, and geography, too, of course. But because Britain’s much smaller and more densely populated it’s much easier to be mobile. You can go to college wherever you want in the country. So you tend to get a collision between people from the North and South suddenly taking place at the university level.
England—The Fall, Cabaret Voltaire, Joy Division; it’s all a Lancashire/Yorkshire axis. So it’s not like this was an alien group of people; it’s just that, for most people, college was the first context in which these groups came together, and therefore their first exposure to different ways of speaking and addressing the world. Maybe it’s made it easier when I’ve spent time in the U.S., because I’m very conscious of it here, too: I can hear accents, I can see when these similar processes happen in the U.S. Whereas we’d all like to keep the myth that we don’t notice these differences somehow. I’m rather interested in the difference between an artist from Georgia and an artist from Washington State and how there are enormous differences in the way they address the world rather than what they do. I think there’s slightly too much obsession in the U.S. with the coasts: people fixate on the differences between L.A. art and New York art. I’m fascinated by the axis up the middle as well, or going from Northwest to Southeast; these are distinctions we don’t think about as much.

RAIL: What else is coming up for you, aside from the public projects you mentioned earlier?

GILLICK: Like a lot of people, I tend to work on a number of parallel projects simultaneously. I use the usual defense that most people use when someone asks them what they’re doing, which is just tell people where I’m going or where I’ve just been, rather than try to really address the question.

RAIL: What are you doing with your time now, outside of art?

GILLICK: I’m about to publish a book in French, which is a translation of a small book I wrote about work, labor, and life in 2010, titled Why Work? It addressed the accusation that artists no longer provide an alternative way to live and addressed issues around precarious labor and assumptions about an artist’s methodology. The book is produced in France using letterpress by the studio of Vincent Auger. Goatskin parchment covers. A lot of craft. But all the images are actually produced in Illustrator. I produced a new cut of Helvetica also on the computer. So in a way the book is an embodiment of the ideas within it.

I’m also at the beginning of several big public artworks; there’s one in Sweden, one in Texas, and one in Switzerland. If I can keep them separate I can avoid a collision where they’ll all end up being done at the same time. Often, I’m not doing anything, and that is the situation to be in. I like to work, I’m interested more in production than consumption: I need to develop, I need to think. But the thing that’s hardest to gain is a feeling of doing nothing—finding the empty space in between things. What I actually intend to do this week, as much as possible, is one of my favorite things: just to lie face down on the floor in my apartment and apparently do nothing. I don’t actually know what happens in that process. It’s sort of like thinking, a kind of weaker form of thinking, clearing your mind.

People often ask, “Oh, can I come film you working in your studio?” or “Can I come photograph you in your studio?” and I don’t really have one. I just tend to work at home; in a way, I never got out of the suburban bedroom. I’m either manically working on a drawing or on the computer; it looks just like anyone else in the cultural sphere. Or I am just lying face down on the floor surrounded by bits and pieces.

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