

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 GILICK: 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 their 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 show new exhibitions of much younger artists inside my retrospective, to put me in conflict with the next generation, as it were. In Zurich they thought it would be

Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

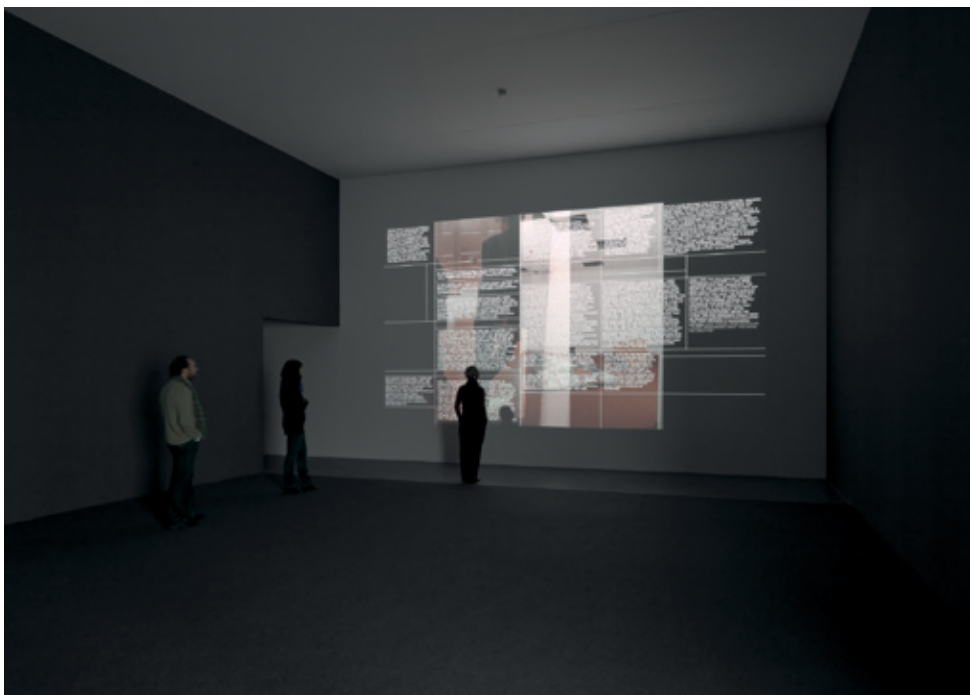
interesting to reanimate and replay some very early work I'd done, which tended to be participatory. In Chicago, the idea was to have a discussion together about what to do. In the end we did something that was integrated within the fabric of the building. So you had this strange sense of a very strong 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 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?

GILICK: 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?

GILICK: 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



Exhibition view, "Discussion Bench Platforms, a 'Volvo Bar' + Everything Good Goes", 2010. Casey Kaplan, NY.

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, so to speak. What are you presenting this May at Casey Kaplan, and then this summer at Bard?

GILLICK: 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 imploded 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 *199A – 199B*—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 intransigent museums 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 presenting art in the public sphere where it can be viewed very passively by the public, perhaps not necessarily in a very intense way?

GILLICK: Most public art is the realization of a kind of accommodation between public and private funding—that's just one of those compromises that's developed in post-industrial countries. Meaning there's an obligation on the part of people who are building things to put some percentage of their budget into some art, but it's not really “public” art as such; it should really be called a different name, like pseudo/public/compromise-work/structure or something like that, but that might not catch on as a term.

What public projects offer me is an opportunity to collaborate with architects. My conversation with the architects is usually a questioning one. They're often pretty sure they've worked out what the relationship is with the public is going to be, it's quite interesting and that's their job. In the most developed cases their vision of the future is either participatory or experiential, so it's like, “Here's a plaza, everyone's going to sit here and have lunch, and have a conversation,” or, “Here's a plaza, and everyone's going to kind of be, not overwhelmed, but like whelmed by this sort of optical experiential sort of soft abstraction that somehow is derived from the history of the site.” So I'm often asking questions and I'm trying to get involved in aspects of the building, the structure, that they haven't viewed as being “appropriate” or “necessary” for public art, or introduce stories or abstractions that are not “derived” from something within the site. I'm working on a couple of things right now where I'm looking at neglected aspects of the project by studying the plans they've worked on and produced. I'm trying to identify dead zones, dead ends, parts of corridors which if you really walked down them in real life you'd end up hitting your head on the underside of a staircase. Things that have been overlooked.



Liam Gillick, “Lying on Top of a Building... The Clouds Looked no Nearer than when I Was Lying on the Street...”, 2010. Stainless steel. Each run of text, 60 cm x 18.28m x 20 cm. Installation view: Fairmont, Pacific Rim, Vancouver. Image courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, NY.

RAIL: Can you say which project this is?

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

RAIL: That's all right.

GILLICK: 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 speculation. 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.

I am 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 it; 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



Liam Gillick, "Reduced Rejection", 2008. White painted aluminium, Plexiglas 44 x 47.25". Image courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, NY.

apart from the artist, the architect, and maybe one or two curatorial minds, generally are just involved to get paid; it's like a sideline, a little extra thing. Therefore people aren't applying pressure politically, psychologically, and intellectually to redirect some of those funds so they don't always have to manifest as a sort of abstraction in a new building. And of course I am not even against abstraction in a new building.

RAIL: 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.As, 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 the art market with these fabulous and incredible terms people often do. My original studies were going to be in philosophy and law; I had a very strong desire to fix the errors of the past, if you could call it that, by getting involved in the Labor Movement as someone who could be an educated advocate for a very particular set of interests. But I changed my mind after working for a "good" lawyer one summer and thought I should go to art school instead because I felt I could always go back later from art to labor but I would never manage to do it the other way around. So I ended up at Goldsmiths but not on the same terms as some of the others. I had given up something to be there. Goldsmiths at that time had quite a lot in common with places like CalArts, where you felt there were teachers there that were real; they were actual artists, but they didn't have unified ideas or ideologies; basically you got to witness arguments between people in their early 40s at a peak of work and rhetoric.

RAIL: Who are you talking about?

GILLICK: They're not all going to be known so well here, but Jon Thompson was extremely important, Richard Wentworth, who was in the last Venice Biennale, and Michael Craig-Martin, who's usually given most of the

credit, but of course was part of a discussion. There were a number of other people who would come in and out, Sarat Maharaj was there later on, but at the time there was also Yehuda Safran, who's now involved with Columbia Architecture School—he was at Goldsmiths around the time I was there. So basically, rather like an American high-end advanced sort of art school, I had the sense it was not about trying to instill a particular attitude or something, but it was really about asking why. Why did you do that?

RAIL: Was that typical of British art schools?

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.

RAIL: Where are you from?

GILLICK: I'm from suburban London, so I'm therefore a Southerner. The North/South clash certainly marked that time and hasn't been thought through or talked about in any meaningful way. You could see people's ideas and thoughts start to develop in a very particular direction because of this combination of stresses. It produced a quite interesting set of possibilities and unique egos.

RAIL: Can you characterize the perceived difference between the Northerners and Southerners?

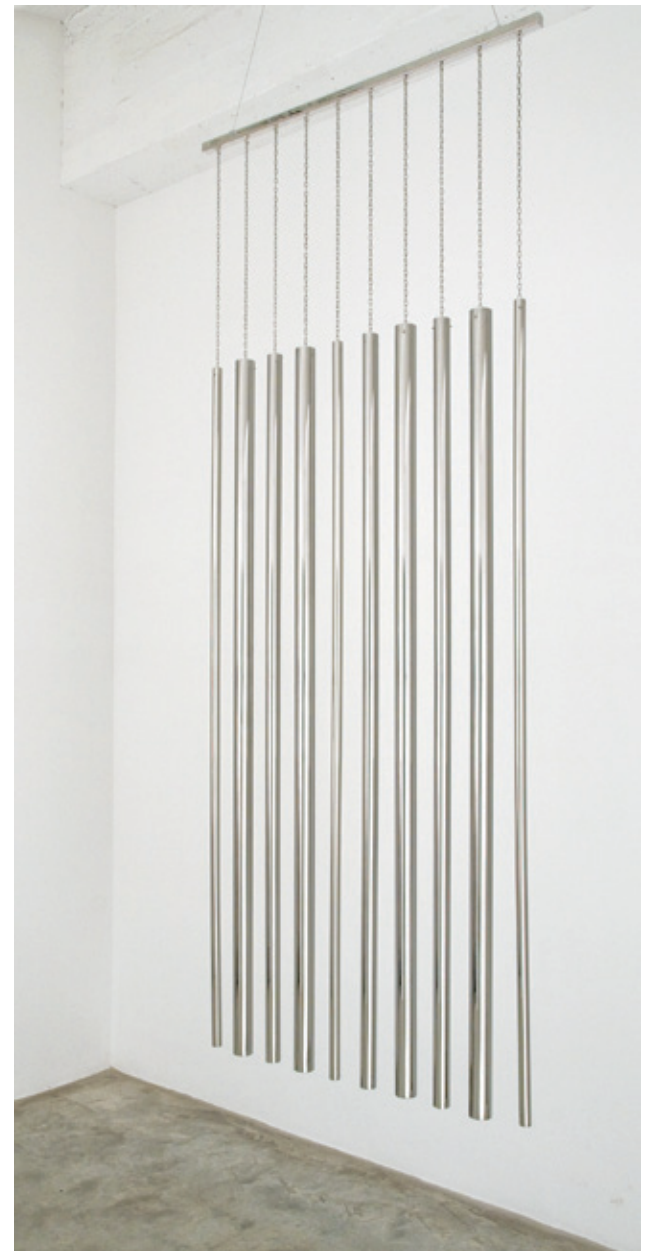
GILLICK: No, not categorically, but, if you look at the three most well-known artists in Britain whose names have travelled to the U.S., it's Henry Moore, David Hockney, and Damien Hirst, and they're all from within 10 square miles of each other, in Yorkshire, in the north of England. It's difficult to characterize, or make a set of stereotypes about these things, but one thing you can say is maybe it's connected to a different way of speaking or approaching the world. Therefore, literally a different voice. A voice that does not always necessarily echo the voice of authority but still speaks with authority.

There are a lot of self-mythologizing things, like the idea that they might speak clearly or plainly. If you look at some of those artists it seems to allow them to say quite pretentious things without it sounding that way. As if they are telling the truth about an untruth.

RAIL: Sort of like talking about art sounds a little more down to earth when they say it?

GILLICK: Well, you could also argue that it has an anti-intellectual quality but I am not completely sure. In the States there's this concept that if you go to both the very south and the very north you'll find plain-speaking people who will just tell it like it is and not get muddled up in bullshit—very different from what you'd get in New York.

But you've got to remember that people of my generation were always very interested in music from the north of



Liam Gillick, "Discussion Island Discussion Bells," 1997/2011. 10 stainless steel tubes, chains. Tubes: 6' / 180cm long each x various diameters: 1" (x3), 1.5" (x3) and 2" (x4). Image courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, NY.

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?

GILICK: 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?

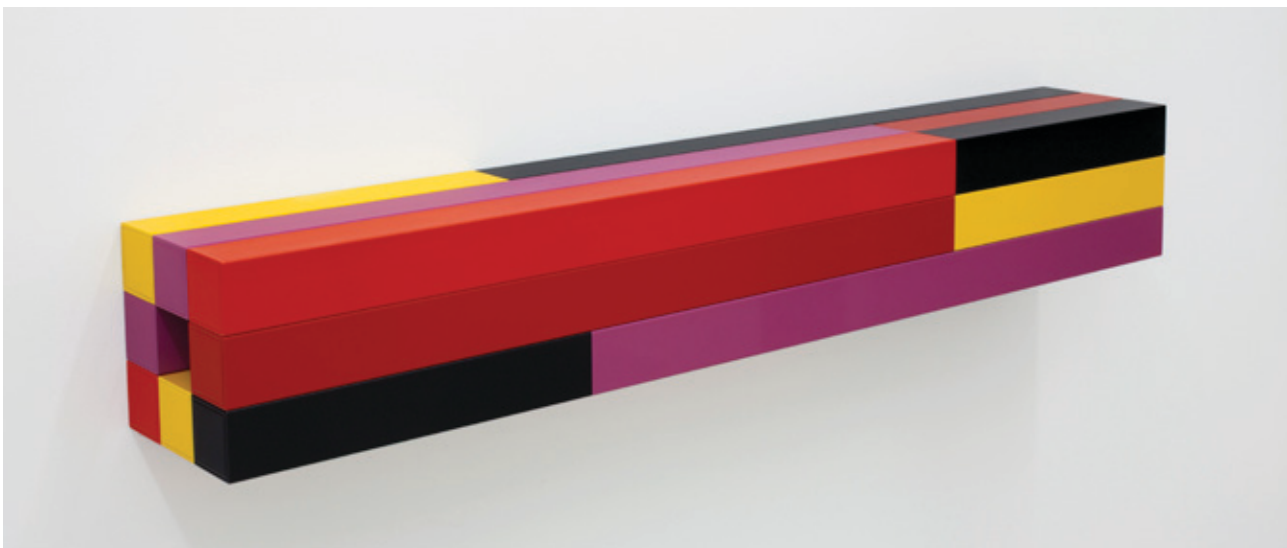
GILICK: I'm about to publish a book in French, which is a translation of a small book I wrote about work, labor, and life in 2010, titled *Why Work?* It addressed the accusation that artists no longer provide an alternative way to live and addressed issues around precarious labor and assumptions about 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



Liam Gillick, "Lying on Top of a Building... The Clouds Looked no Nearer than when I Was Lying on the Street...", 2010. Stainless steel. Each run of text, 60 cm x 18.28m x 20 cm. Installation view: Fairmont, Pacific Rim, Vancouver. Image courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, NY.



Liam Gillick, "Open Production," 2008/2012. Ivory painted aluminium. 78.7 x 75.6 x 5.9". Image courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, NY. Photo: Cathy Carver.

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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