

Art is a convenient term for a mid-space location where you don't need cultural permission to carry out certain corrective tasks in relation to society in general.

There are a number of keys to understanding my work; one is distraction. . . . What I like about the position of an artist is that you might start out intending to be a DJ but end up cleaning the floor with vodka and glitter instead.

—Liam Gillick

If Liam Gillick cites distraction as one of the main keys to understanding his work, it is to underscore the fundamental difference between his open-ended artistic practice and the professional world at large, where the emphasis is on the finished product and professional behavior is confined by the practical demands of bringing about concrete solutions to a predetermined set of problems. Operating from what he calls “a mid-space location,” Gillick engages disciplines such as journalism, architecture, design, and cinematography, not to produce an article, an object, a movie, or any other finished product so much as to investigate conditions of creativity and principals of production in relation to their underlying organizational structures.¹

Strategies of “displacement” and “parallel thinking” are at the heart of Gillick’s enterprise, an all-encompassing critique of and discourse on social ideology. The concrete results of his practice are familiar-looking objects that are materially and formally derived from the world of corporate study-centers, open-plan offices, and conference rooms. The signs, diagrams, texts, photographs, stage sets, screen partitions, platforms, cages, and corrals Gillick creates for his exhibitions seemingly prepare for, document, or allude to some form of realization, and thus set the stage for a discussion of the *making of*—the *hows* and *whys* of production. This is especially true for Gillick’s highly finished fabricated pieces, which he sees as “half-objects” that do not need “auratic value,” the projection of “essentialist concepts,” or a neo-Duchampian gesture to be meaningful.² Instead, he locates the importance of his objects within their potential for “applicability,” which he defines as their active engagement and redefinition of the space they inhabit, and which is reflected in the captions that accompany each work.

In activating a thought space, these half-objects eschew a purely formalist reading in conscious opposition to modernist concepts.

The primary aesthetic function of Gillick’s installations is their playful appropriation and structural redefinition of a given space. But they are also conduits of meaning, props in the staging of abstract ideas. Textual elements introduce ideas and are reminders that the objects are just one element in a larger intellectual experiment that includes the production, over the past ten years, of an important body of texts culminating in the publication of a series of books. Each exhibition is an associative, discursive adaptation of old ideas as well as the generator of new ones, which in turn are explored in writing over an extended period of time. Texts and objects are created in a parallel and open-ended thought process. Complex, paradoxical, and always provisional, they revolve mainly around the critical evaluation of concepts of political and economic power and the social realities these concepts inspire. Keenly interested in the cultural manifestations of ideology, Gillick is involved in a constant negotiation of the past and present in view of the near future. History and the utopias envisioned by writers, filmmakers, philosophers, and scientists such as Edward Bellamy, Stanley Kubrick, Karl Marx, and B.F. Skinner, to name only a few, form Gillick’s intellectual hunting ground and nourish his theoretical discourse. Some of these alternative visions of society have already reached their expiration dates, their futures being either our present or our recent past, and Gillick makes liberal use of the advantage of hindsight in his consideration of them.

Literally, the two-part exhibition comprising a wall diagram and a text cube conceived for The Museum of Modern Art, and invites the viewer to reflect on some of the implications of

Gillick’s recent book *Literally No Place* (2002). The sentence constituting the text cube is a direct citation from *Walden Two* (1948), Skinner’s postwar vision of an autonomous, self-sufficient commune, in which the communist model of prediction and planning has given way to that of communal speculation based on the projection of collective desires. This fictionalized outline of behaviorist principles applied to the construction of an alternative society is the primary reference point of *Literally No Place*. Skinner’s phrase “My step was light and I could feel the ball of each foot pushing the earth down from me as I walked” encapsulates a moment of revelation, a change of attitude, and a sudden belief in the workings of the commune that enabled Skinner’s protagonist “to feel the earth again.”³ In the context of the exhibition, this sentence functions as a rhetorical tool to stimulate an equally sincere engagement with our own surroundings. It has taken on the form of signage, marking a place in space to halt. The accompanying diagrammatic rendering of an abstracted landscape alludes to the commune’s desert setting. Absent of any trace of settlements, it represents an ideology-free environment that is yet to be defined and hence full of potential.

Literally No Place is the last in a series of four major texts written over the past ten years. Merging fiction and theory, Gillick develops conceptual narratives that allow him to present ideas in a nonlinear, open-ended discursive format, in which the textual structure mirrors the structuring of the presented ideas. The first two essays, “McNamara” (1993), set in the early 1960s, and “Erasmus Is Late” (1995), moving fluidly between 1810 and 1997, are conceived around specific historical characters: Robert McNamara, secretary of defense to John F. Kennedy, and Erasmus Darwin, brother of Charles Darwin. In both texts Gillick

engages a cast of so-called secondary figures, people who were “not at the center of power, but central to power,” in a series of seemingly important but eventually inconclusive actions and reflections that are directed toward somebody or something that never materializes.⁴ What remains is the critical reconsideration of historical moments and the ideologies that shaped them.

With the publication of *Discussion Island/Big Conference Center* (1997), Gillick’s focus shifts from the past to the future. In this book three characters living in a nonspecific present are working toward the projection of a future. Again, none of their concentrated research adds up to anything concrete. But somewhere in the midst of this ultimately inscrutable articulation of a “blurred relationship between people and effects” emerges the idea of a future within what Gillick calls a “post-utopian” context, born out of speculation and begging for consolidation.⁵ Gillick’s approach to imaginings of the future is not to be confused with a utopian impulse. The futurist incentive, or his idealism, as he phrases it, is “rooted in discussion, negotiation, and the examination of compromised states”—it is critical, not visionary, working from within the system, not outside it, trying to develop applicable perspectives, not idealistic breakaway alternatives.⁶ In open acknowledgment of the dominant role of economics in the formation of the sociopolitical landscape, Gillick usurps corporate territory by adopting its strategic tools, methodological vocabulary, and aesthetic signifiers to put it to critical and ultimately subversive use. This includes a demonstration of breakdown and failure: “There are as many demonstrations of compromise, strategy, and collapse in my work as there are clear recipes for how our environment can be better. Everything I do runs alongside other structures that exist in the world, so it must



Left to right:
Consciens Lobby. 2001. Installation view: powder-coated aluminum, 11'9¼" x 11'9¼" x 11'9¼" (360 x 360 x 360 cm). Commission for Telenor Corporation, Oslo, Norway

Revision. 1998. Installation view: anodized aluminum, Plexiglas, and paint, dimensions variable. Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris. Photo courtesy Jean Brazille

Applied Discussion Platform. 2003. Detail: powder-coated and anodized aluminum, dimensions variable. Courtesy Deka Bank, Frankfurt am Main, and Schipper und Krome, Berlin

at times exhibit the same problems and concerns of that world.”⁷

Literally No Place is written from the same postutopian position that is evoked in *Discussion Island*. But whereas the latter revolves mainly around critical evaluation and instrumentation of the mechanisms and manifestations of capitalism and corporate culture (with the occasional glimpse of social consequence), the former addresses more directly how ideology shapes the environment and how that environment in turn affects the morals of those who inhabit it. *Literally No Place* follows three people as they leave a desert commune in order to reassess their habitat from a critical distance. Just as in *Discussion Island*, we are drawn into parallel narratives in which three speakers outline an environment affected by ethical shifts. Eventually reframed as radio plays, these three locales are revisited, expanded, and redefined in a constant shifting of parameters, creating a web of interrelated scenarios that address “what happens when speculation becomes the dominant tool in defining our urban environment” in an attempt to inspire the adoption of a more socially responsible set of values.⁸

Punctuated by a continuous thread of quotes from cultural theorists, *Literally No Place* offers multiple critical reference points for the reconsideration of systems of exchange and the construction of morals in a constantly evolving contemporary climate that redefines the concept of utopia as “literally no place” and begs redefinition toward a functional model of society. In this context *Literally* offers a moment of reflective pause and repose, as well as an invitation to participate in Gillick’s ongoing investigation into the semiotics of the built environment.

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1. Liam Gillick, “The Semiotics of the Built World,” in *Liam Gillick, The Wood Way* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2002), p. 80.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
3. Gillick, “Liam Gillick: Literally No Place—An Introduction,” *Parkett* 61, (2001): 57.
4. Gillick, quoted by Susanne Gaensheimer, in *Liam Gillick* (Cologne: Oktagon Verlag, and New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2000), p. 7.
5. Gillick, *McNamara Papers, Erasmus and Bukal Realizations, The What If? Scenarios* (Dijon: Le Consortium, and Hamburg: Kunstverein, 1997), p. 82.
6. Gillick, “The Semiotics of the Built World,” p. 82.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

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Graphics: Liam Gillick

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Community

One of the subplots to my work over the last few years has been the peculiar legacy of communal thinking that developed in the West in the decades just before and just after the interlude of early modernism. The United States offers a unique and exemplary case in relation to the idea of smallish groups of people getting together in order to live slightly differently from everyone else. There is a history of communal projects here that is part of "American exceptionalism." While the term is originally attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville, it has been in wide use in recent years, notably in Martin Lipset's book of the same name, which addresses, among other things, the reasons why "socialism has never taken hold in the United States" and why "American religion and foreign policy have a moralistic, crusading streak."¹

The development of social space in most of the United States since the collapse of the Socialist Party in the 1912 presidential election has been marked by a drive away from modern

collectivist social thinking and progressive action, but at all points there have been correctives to this process and fragmented echoes of alternative visions. One such peculiarity is *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1888), by Edward Bellamy, a book notable both for its proposal of a postcapitalist utopia and its archaic style. Another (even clunkier) text is *Walden Two* (1948), by B.F. Skinner, written in the gap between World War II and the Cold War.

In 2000 I was invited to produce a work for the Norwegian state telecom company, Telenor. The timing of the commission coincided with the partial privatization of what was formerly a publicly owned resource. A large text cube, wall design, and ceiling text designated a foyer as a place to consider the way ethical shifts leave their trace in the built world. At the time I was studying Thomas More's *Utopia* and Skinner's applied neo-utopian vision toward the completion of my own compressed book, *Literally No Place* (2002). *Walden Two* provides

a glimpse of poetry—a moment that synthesizes the contradictory value systems circling around the book—when a visitor to Skinner's behaviorist utopia stops for a moment to consider the implications of what he has witnessed and how things should proceed personally and socially: "MY STEP WAS LIGHT AND I COULD FEEL THE BALL OF EACH FOOT PUSHING THE EARTH DOWN FROM ME AS I WALKED."

For *Projects 79*, the Norwegian thinking has been developed and clarified: a text cube functioning somewhere between a sign for a nonevent and an announcement of intentions; a reflection of the way things could be and a meeting point; a piece of formalized rhetoric in relation to a wall diagram (note the use of the word diagram rather than drawing). The diagram is the abstraction of a location or setting that echoes an environment where there are still options in terms of direction and development. Something designed for a lobby. A work intended as a backdrop.

One of the great battles of the twentieth century was between speculation and planning. For the most part, speculation, often heavily subsidized, seems to have won. This work is intended to function as a moment of pause—all backdrop and foreground with an absent central core of ideas to be tweaked and reconfigured by visitors to the space. For a couple of years I wrote a column titled "Lobby" for the magazine *Art/Text*. The use of the word was deliberate, telegraphing an interest in the battle for control of the middle ground.

Liam Gillick
New York, 2003

1. Martin Lipset, introduction, *American Exceptionalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995).

biography and exhibitions

Liam Gillick (b. 1964, Aylesbury, Great Britain) was educated at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He has taught at Columbia University, New York, since 1997.

Selected solo exhibitions: *Communes, bar and greenrooms*, The Powerplant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, 2003; *Exterior Days*, Casey Kaplan, New York, 2003; *The Wood Way*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 2002.

Selected group exhibitions: 50th Venice Biennale, 2003; *What If?*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2000; Documenta X, 1997.

Books include: *Literally No Place* (London: Book Works, 2002); *Five or Six* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 1999); *Discussion Island/Big Conference Center* (Ludwigsburg: Kunstverein Ludwigsburg, and Derry: Orchard Gallery, 1997); *Erasmus Is Late* (London: Book Works, 1995).