

**SEPARATE BUT NOT MARGINAL:
AN INTERVIEW WITH LIAM GILLICK BY CLIFF LAUSON**

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Cliff Lauson

You have spoken about being an artist very much of your time, and yet your practice differs significantly from the art that emerges in Britain in the late eighties. Can you discuss your shared past with artists of this generation but perhaps a divergent present?

Liam Gillick

During the time that I went to Goldsmiths, changes in higher education in the post-war period had clarified themselves up to the point where the idea of going to art school could be viewed as an activity in itself that might produce artists rather than distracted people on their way to do something else, in the great British tradition of art schools leading to music or attitude, although this was primarily a phenomena that disappeared once art schools offered degrees. It meant that by the 1980s you had a real diversity in terms of class and background (but not cultural identity) because it was the last period in Britain where the financial grant was just enough that you could become a self-sufficient person at University. That's completely gone again now because the money is not there and it's more complicated to get through higher education, but there was this peculiar moment when there was a coming together of quite a diverse class and background base. It wasn't very diverse in other ways, ethnically or internationally. I come from a suburban background, which leads to a simultaneous sense of delusion and distraction, which explains something of the ideological complexity in how my work developed. I had no focus and no vision among all these people who were often a self-conscious caricature of the idea of a focused and visionary, yet ironically self-aware artist. This was embedded in the way they behaved or the way they did things. My position was much more relative and the work I was doing lacked a straight-forward relationship to an ironic take on the failures of modernism. Some of the work was extremely precise, politically and some was a negotiation of formalism. Two traits you still see in the work. I became very curious about positions where historically you might have a lack of focus and you might have diversity within the work itself. But the models for this tended not to come from Britain, with the exception of Richard Hamilton, for example, so I had to look outside the British historical context to try and find other models for working.

Because you had many of these character types or caricatures of the idea of being an artist, there was no focus within the school. Historically, if you look at art schools they often had an artistic style. For example, the Slade or the Royal College of Art each had or generated a

style that was distinctive from the post-modern assertive non-style of Goldsmiths. Although, it has to be said the level of intellectual discussion at Goldsmiths was extremely high, but it is often perceived as a recipe towards success rather than critique.

CL

So if the ideas and themes that surround your work were shaped both by your suburban background and by a particular context at Goldsmiths, is your work then localised and specific or is it equally relevant to any given location or historical moment?

LG

One of things that doesn't get talked about is the extent to which the intellectual and ideological factions at Goldsmiths were generated by the teachers. Most students were often too busy trying to reinvent the idea of being an artist. At Goldsmiths, there were two key factions. The 'Michael Craig-Martin and visiting critics' faction was based on a model of analysis and a way of relating to things in the world that are built and constructed, via a play with constructions of ideas and language. You might call them the Derrida and Wittgenstein people. Then there was definitely another group around Jon Thompson who you might call the 'Bataille and Foucault people'. These were the melancholic sex and death people. They were the people who thought, 'How can you be an artist now? There's no focus, no shared ideas, no ability to say that this is a vision or this is the way it should be.' But rather than becoming culturally analytical and ironic, the base of their work was fundamentally devolved to a post-modern emptying out of imagery around the idea of sex, death and power critics. Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst – sex and death. Myself and maybe one or two other people were much more interested in dealing with apparent paradoxes and contradictions in the way art develops and challenges meaning and the way ideology leaves traces in art. This doesn't mean that the sex and death people were more of their time; it's just that the ideologies and the ideas that backed-up their approaches seem to be always somewhat appropriate to any time. You could be working in Ghent in 1320 and say, 'I'm interested in sex and death'. It is hard to not see this return to 'fundamentals' as part of a neo-conservative tendency. It was certainly viewed that way at the time. Even as we must concede that there was some play with modes of representation.

CL

And now you have become more or less affiliated with the group of artists included in Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (1998, English translation 2002), but also with other artists through group exhibitions who appear to share a similar conceptual attitude or methodology. Obviously, each of the artists included in *Relational*

***Aesthetics* has his or her independent practice, so how coherent do you think these groupings are?**

LG

This has been going on for a long time. I first exhibited in Germany and France in the very early 1990s. Of course to a certain extent there are shared interests between myself, Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, but we were working together long before Nicolas developed his text as a way to try and rationalise certain apparently un-resolvable tensions between the work. One was to try to resist showing back the dominant culture that which it already knows. But I am also influenced by the artists around the Christian Nagel Gallery, Cologne in the early 1990s, who were interested to align themselves with what you could call a much more clear-cut legacy of critical theory. These artists included Clegg & Guttman, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, Fareed Armaly, and others. Stephen Prina was also important with his melding of formalist aesthetics and critical analysis. However, I along with some others, share a suspicion of the idea of a critical engagement that argues for transparency and the simple exposure of machinations of the dominant culture as the only correct way to operate as a critical artist in society.

Among the non-group who have worked together a great deal there are a number of shared subplots. None of us are who we seem to be. People talk about Thai artist Rirkrit, but he was born in Buenos Aires and he is essentially someone who was educated and brought up within the US context. Philippe was born in Algeria from a Spanish background, but really brought up and educated in France. Jorge [Pardo] is Cuban, born in Havana, but is essentially Californian. One thing that ties us together is that from a biographical perspective there's a degree of projection onto us that is not inherent in the work. I think this is quite an interesting factor. It may be a common trend. However, it is this complication of identity and difference that means we have more in common with culturally transparent work than some critics realise, including Nicolas, but also a suspicion of who controls the discourse and the extent to which they unthinkingly encourage transparency. Dynamic challenged groups are not traditionally aided by the plea for more transparency from the dominant culture. Sinn Fein would not have got very far if the working processes of their struggle had been completely transparent at all stages.

CL

Is there a shared interest amongst the artists you mention in terms of a rejection of or antagonism toward high modernism, by which I mean the separation of art from life?

LG

We are a certain generation of artists who decided that the territories of design and public space were the legacy of battles over the gendering of creativity. Design and decoration were used as gender-based pejoratives when I was a student. Jorge, Rirkrit and I decided to embrace those things that were embedded in critique of our culture and mark the locations of exchange. I think all of us are interested in what you might call 'functional utopias'. We are interested to re-examine those aspects of progressive modernism that leave a functional trace in the culture. There is no doubt that the right used the accusation of utopian extremism towards any progressive moves in applied modernism. We are from a generation that was told that the processes of modernism had come loose from the process of modernity as a cultural and political dynamic. I think we wanted to reintroduce those elements of the modernist project that could still sit in opposition to the ravages of unchecked modernity. This is why certain critics coming from a classical post-war interpretation of Marxism and aesthetics have found it quite hard to resolve their sense of melancholic modernistic self-referential collapse with our continued examination of the gap between modernism and modernity.

CL

Is there any element of Britishness in your work? For example, how easily does participating in French artists, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno's project about the liberation of the fictional Japanese anime character, Annlee, integrate into your practice? Could you expand on this cross-cultural collaboration?

LG

I've always been suspicious of any drive to localise art and make it seem geographically and culturally specific rather than part of a political matrix of critical entry points. This position however might be deeply problematic and can only be said with a consciousness of the opportunist British historical tradition. It's what British people have always done; they've had this piratical internationalism on the quiet, mixed with a patronizing illusion of cultural specificity as a way to marginalise and 'celebrate' things. So I'm always negotiating this paradox. My interest has always been to participate in international dialogue and the idea of art as a free-floating signifier within a mix of cultural formations. Collaborative negotiations such as the Annlee project are difficult. I was nervous about dealing with it. Everything I did was an attempt to undermine and expose my consciousness of the structure. My title used a French sentence structure, *Annlee You Proposes*, and I worked with a Danish-Australian animator coming from a completely commercial world. I had the text checked all the time by a loose group of supervisors who ranged from people in Finland to close collaborators. I felt especially nervous about the idea of these French men appropriating a Japanese female animated character. I went through quite an elaborate procedure of checking and qualifying which isn't necessarily apparent in the result, but does influence the way things feel. I was

trying to play as much with what the other artists were doing as I was with the idea of the character as part of a French legacy of authorial and character collapse.

CL

How does humour or naiveté play out in your work? You have designed deadpan interventions within corporate buildings, but also equally within schools, and of course children also play a major role in your writing on functional communes.

LG

Some of it is to do with living in London, but actually being from a Celtic background and having that identity applied to you throughout your life. From an early age I have been interested in what you might call logical dislogic – this is also why I am drawn to the work of Lawrence Weiner. This is all to do with language and strategic political deployment. I was always drawn more to a James Joyce understanding of modernism than a Le Corbusier version of modernism. The title of my thesis at art school was ‘Horseness is the whatness of allhorse’ which is a perfect modernist truism. It takes an abstraction, makes a picture out of it and then functionalises the picture within a comprehensible, culturally identifiable set of terms. It then turns the new activated picture back onto the critical structure from which it emerged. You could say that this is a good equation for understanding my work.

Working in France at the beginning people would talk about ‘play’ – a Situationist disruption in a self-consciously complex way. Continually changing the rules of engagement with society. That was influential. An Anglo-Saxon system thinks games have already been clarified. Play is very different from the Anglo-Saxon use of wit, making a big box and propping it up on a cork. That sort of things used to drive me nuts. You see the legacy of play in the work where I used the phrase ‘So were people this dumb before television?’ [1998], rhetoric culturally re-hydrated into a functional yet paradoxically challenging phrase.

CL

Your work encompasses different media and disciplines that all seem to centre around a multivalent philosophical position. Is your choice of different mediums and formats, between the abstract and the direct, to connect with different audiences and to allow varied engagements with this generalised philosophy?

LG

If you are a distracted and deluded person, you can become interested in complex social phenomena as a way to mirror your sense of multiple entry points. You might also develop an interest in the way art has historically tried to find something to work against. This will inevitably include self-conscious ideas in terms of cultural refusal and side-stepping. I always

found the idea of consolidating form and content difficult. Another big problem in the recent past has been the question, 'What is the idea behind your work?' A lot of my work is derived from how to get around the singularity problem and instead find multiple sources, often self-created multiple starting points. Certainly, a lot of my structures and projects are not resolved in the sense that dealing with any specific thing doesn't necessarily lead you to a moment of consolidation or sublimation or any of these other things that art traditionally did. The point of entry into the ideas is multiple. Certain things work as lures or attractors while other things hold you away in a web of text. If you are interested in providing a critique of the middle ground, then you have to consider questions of contingency, strategy, negotiation, compromise, and refusal. These are the abstractions at the core of the work. And recently, I have realised that the key marker here is a re-examination of the notion of difference in relation to cultural production.

CL

How is your practise able to both bring people into the gallery and also facilitate those transitory conversations? It seems to me that much of your work is object-based while simultaneously occupying the contradictory position of being catalysts for interaction.

LG

I'm very interested in the idea of a disinterested spectator. Artists have their space in society and it's their obligation to negotiate specific relationships. Consider the work I produced for a passage way on Euston Road [*Reciprocal Passage Work*, 2003]: I don't imagine many people stopping, considering or connoisseuring it. I was given access to a social space that is semi-public and semi-private and therefore rather complicated politically. The work is part of a route through a private development that links two public streets. With this, as in other works, I tried to play off the way that the built world carries ideologies, soft ideologies in trace form. In these situations I'm trying to reveal some of the ways that elsewhere in the development they couldn't hide specific ideologies through their manipulation of space. It is notable that my passageway has gates at either end that can be locked if necessary. By looking up at the work on the ceiling you tend to miss the gates. Their presence dissolves. The work, therefore, is not to do with essentialism or the way things are; it's to do with the way structures change meaning in the face of specific soft pressures. There are attempts made all the time in society to ameliorate the conditions that people have had to deal with and attempts to make them nicer and even more sexy and elegant. I'm trying to play with some of those codes and become integrated and disintegrated at the same time. I'm interested to be in the social territory, but do not always want to make statements overly signified in art terms. People are sophisticated and can sense an art moment. I want to find those moments of flicker where ideologies and forms break down into a multiplicity of potentials.

CL

How does your work operate in relation to the way ideology finds form in society?

LG

When I am involved with a building or urban change, there's a lot more projection onto me of what an artist might represent than I am projecting back. The idea that an artist might be able to make things 'better' is still a very commonly held notion. Within the political and the cultural sphere, the philosophy that surrounds the idea of an artist is actually one from about fifty years ago – that artists deal with abstractions, they synthesize an idea into an abstraction, and they are basically involved in a process whereby they can make things that are separate from the rest of the world. This was originally intended to de-alienate people – by seeing art they might be able to share a neo-sublime moment out of sync with the functional world around them. This sense has morphed via a combination of instrumental strategy mixed with continual extensions of the 'designated' world into a semi-private sphere of constantly negotiated and designed moments. I am interested in some of the tensions between what people think about something and how it operates in the culture now. I am interested to analyse some high-cultural escapes into the public realm alongside with a revelation of the paradoxes and anxieties created by our continually renovated spaces.

CL

Was this assumption of what an artist is supposed to be or do the case in your recent commission for the new British Home Office building in London?

LG

I was presented with initial drawings that showed areas that were supposed to signify art-like stuff in various parts of the building. It was a very precise projection of where art should function in a place. It was an excess of preparation. They had already decided how my work might read in relation to the building without any specific image of what that reading would be or what it would signify. I was therefore subject to the desire of architects who changed their designs to get around a problem by inviting an artist to completely transform the building.

We melded the working process. I was involved in discussions about every aspect of the building. We wanted to get to the point where the moment of authorship within the project became indistinguishable. I wanted to retain the 'diagram' of the building and integrate my work. The idea of working on the Home Office was a complex one given its symbolic and actual function. But I was prepared to do it as an interventionist experiment. I was originally invited on the grounds that the project might complicate my cultural work. It was a functional experiment in relation to my earlier work, such as *Discussion Island/Big Conference Centre* from 1997.

CL

Had they selected you based on your previous architectural commissions like the Euston Road passage way? Were they hoping for a kind of coloured Plexiglas decoration for their building?

LG

The Government Art Collection were interested in the prospect of giving me something that would expose and heighten the ideological issues already at play in the work. This posed a problem because I was subject to an expectation of appropriateness in terms of my intellectual and formal abilities to negotiate the situation. These were not assumptions about the art, but concerned with my ability to address such a complex project politically. The finished glass canopy, which you would think is the most recognizable aspect of my work, was actually developed collaboratively. The architects had taken my work and worked very hard on trying to apply certain attitudes to the structure. Terry Farrell was extremely good to work with and allowed the art to completely mark the building. But I worked most closely with Giles Martin on getting the work to replace many existing structural elements.

CL

That's interesting because the glass canopy is the most immediately identifiable component that appears to signify your work or intervention. I think it is usually assumed that this is your sole contribution to the building.

LG

When something is available to the culture and other people have knowledge of it, they have an ability to read it and use it. It has use-value within the society, and it has a function within the society that can be shared. It can be seen and understood within an aesthetic context and understood within the public domain. So, while you might immediately ascribe authorship because that canopy resembles a work by Liam Gillick, but it's not only my work and nor are the other aspects of the building only the architects work.

CL

It's simply reading the visual and not the system.

LG

Exactly. I accepted the outline diagram of the building and layered my ideas on top of that. You retain an ability to see the original building, yet you are seeing it through layers of applied thinking. One manifestation of this was a series of text panels that are set just behind the

surface of the buildings curtain wall. A super-text that resists reading but marks the site as a contestable space in the culture.

CL

The textual part of your practice not only appears in your sign and sculptural work, but also your prose and almost poetic writing that often accompanies work or exhibitions. How does the writing function in relation to the sculpture and installation?

LG

I wouldn't use the word poetic. I would rather suggest that the writing is sometimes quite compressed. There are many art decisions that you can make in a text towards the creation of a condensed core of ideas. I have often played with this idea of what is seen as socially and culturally valuable in Britain and England from a middle-brow perspective. I've worked with animation instead of making movies, developed a musical instead of an opera, and written short books, which play with histories instead developing grand literary forms. There is a subtext in the work about using structural strategies that are culturally specified but shift in significance once you expose them elsewhere or fill them with new content.

CL

I want to come back to this idea of the 'functional utopia'. Utopianism has once again become incorporated as a term into art institutions as a way of describing a certain social attitude towards an interaction...

LG

During my involvement in Utopia Station at the 2003 Venice Biennale I was quite sceptical about the use of the term Utopia, because I was fed up of people suggesting that any attempt anyone has ever made in the modern period to make things better has been utopian. I resent it because I don't think that any attempt to make circumstances better is utopian. I think that's what the pragmatic side of what my work is about. Hans Ulrich Obrist is interested in Cedric Price, who proposed a mobile university that moved around on train tracks. I'm more interested in how you could build a decent housing estate in Sheffield and make it work. Is that utopian? Well, I'm not sure it's utopian. There are actual political, psychological, and social reasons why certain aspects of the modern project were dangled in front of people and then withdrawn and allowed to decay. Thomas More, who wrote *Utopia* [1515], was critiquing people who were too divorced from the idea of what you could actually do, the question was how you could you really negotiate, and how you could really get things done. I'm much more involved with functional utopias and that's why I'm more interested in an architect who built public housing in Rotterdam in 1952 than I am in Cedric Price, even if the housing estate has

become a compromised structure. I don't think the progressive project is complete. I don't think we've reached a meaningless, ironic, relativist situation.

CL

Can you address the problem of separating interventions and installations beyond the formal gallery space from the critique that the resulting spaces are too celebratory or utopian or are simply trendy lounges and cafés?

LG

If you look at the cover of the English translation of *Relational Aesthetics*, you see a woman sitting on her own, quietly in a room, in a free public space next to a market in the middle of France. A lot of ordinary people just wandering in and out. There are no good times on show, there's no party, there's no festival. It's just a person sitting alone in a room reading a book.

If you look at the public projects I do, I'm often invited because someone has seen a discussion structure or a text work. But they rarely get a purely aesthetic intervention and instead a negotiation begins that is pointed and often involves strenuous discussion. I was asked by the city of Brussels to make a public artwork for a public housing project and decided that the people living there needed a better entry-phone system and better foyers. I had to fight like crazy at every meeting to get that instead of a discrete structure for contemplation or generalised statements about social hierarchies. In the end, I insisted they could not refer to my activity as an artwork and I exposed the repeated failings of the system to provide people with decent facilities and substitute them with art-like gestures. On the other hand, the café at the Whitechapel [*The Wood Way*, 2002] was interesting because that's where I used to go and sit and work, and it is a location for the Whitechapel's own meetings. It was also my way of trying to break the timetable of art within an institution. I was given a couple of months to do a show, but I wanted to have something that wasn't caught in that cycle. It is an artwork and has a label to say that. It is not 'an amenity' at a request of the Director. I had to work hard to get it accepted as a thing to be viewed within the structure of the exhibition, but never had a problem with either the Whitechapel or the visitors.

CL

So is there then an element of altruism present in your work that is not necessarily present in other 'relational' works? Is there a sense or expectation of making real implications or real sustained impacts?

LG

I'm quite interested in the idea of thinking as a form of resistance. This is not a question of being exclusive; it's a question of not patronizing people. Thought is not a commodity. I am

not altruistic, I just trust peoples' intelligence. It's an old truism, but if you can negotiate a city then you can certainly deal with some art. The institutional role should not be to patronise people and it should not just re-describe to them what they think they saw when they came in. The institution should actually bring up the complicated ideas that are not always apparent within the appearance of the work. I don't think that's necessarily altruistic, it's just that if you've decided to do this kind of work.

CL

Then does your work hold your audience in a balance between serious contemplation and light-hearted disinterest?

LG

Yes, because I'm not bothered by the obligation of work to be weighty, in terms of its formal qualities, or profound at every given moment. I think the work is often 'aprofound' and quite LITE, as in low-calorie because I am interested in secondary phenomena. But I don't see why art can't be like that. This is about wanting to be separate, but not marginal: a legacy of my Irish Heritage. In the book [*Literally No Place: Communes, Bars and Greenrooms*, 2002], I looked at the idea of a bar in Derry situated in close proximity to an army check-post. This was not about going out onto the street and banging dustbin lids or trying to shoot a soldier and making art about things we already know. It was about the IRA setting up its own social checkpoint opposite an army checkpoint. The reference point was the idea of being in a bar in a bunker right underneath an army post. A normal bar on a Friday night with chintzy things hanging on the walls, nice red wallpaper, old ladies, children, and so on. From the outside it's a concrete bunker and an incredible site of resistance and on the inside it's a place of difference but one which doesn't reflect back to the dominant system that which it already knows. Separate but not marginal, an articulation of difference rather than contradiction.

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