

# DISCUSSION SCENARIO CONTENT MENT

In the Hollywood comedy *Groundhog Day* (1993), the fate of the central character is to wake up to the very same day each and every morning. A twist on this scenario has recently been used in a British TV ad: in the film, TV reporter Bill Murray uses his magical knowledge of future events to win Andie McDowell's love; in the advert, magic is replaced by technology – a boy has a group of friends with mobile phones who monitor the moves of the girl he wants to win. He is informed that she is going skating on a lake and is ready to impress her with an ice sculpture (a direct reference to the film); at a Christmas party, he knows a few seconds in advance when she will pass under the mistletoe.

Wave goodbye to Fate, say hello to communications skills. If *Groundhog Day* is driven by a desire to break the deadlock of

siastic, engaged, intelligent discussion. But, unlike the Christmas mistletoe, there is no tradition to suggest that standing under one of his suspended ceilings of coloured Perspex framed in aluminium, with the word 'discussion' in its title, will make that happen. On another level, Gillick provides concrete subjects for discussion in his writing, circling around semi-fictional scenarios in which secondary historical figures, such as Robert McNamara (Kennedy's Secretary of Defense), Masaru Ibuka (inventor of the Sony Walkman), Erasmus Darwin (brother of Charles) or Murray Wilson (father of Brian), play out the social and economic shifts of their and our times. But even if you think of these writings as the corona of Gillick's pristine Perspex or plywood arrangements, they don't make up for a lack of discussion. Gillick doesn't pretend he



Big Conference Centre Limitation Screen 1998  
Anodised aluminium, Perspex Dimensions variable

## Jörg Heiser on Liam Gillick

Modern life by offering access to love through faith and magic, this magic now comes courtesy of Nokia and Ericsson.

Liam Gillick's 'What if? Scenario' and 'Discussion Island' series are set against the background hum of a techno-magic Utopia in which easy satisfaction of your every need is at hand if you only take advantage of the available communication tools. The mobile phone advert offers a traditional answer to a traditional problem: what if you miss a kiss? Gillick's proposition is a trickier one: that what we might miss amidst the irony-laden small-talk of art events is enthu-

can solve the problem singlehandedly. The light may fall onto you through the coloured sheets, but it won't provide church window epiphanies – instead it offers a candy-coloured reminder of a constitutive lack. Constitutive, in the sense that you feel people sometimes avoid certain discussions – politically-charged discussions – because they might touch on the fundamentals of exclusion that make business run smoothly and life reassuring. Viewed naively, Gillick's pieces appear as quasi-utopian sites in the relative autonomy of the art world, for the enactment of the Habermasian notion of



communication without constraints. Yet, constructed from the materials favoured by the suburban office, health club and shopping area (aluminium, friendly-coloured Perspex, pine panels), they only become *actual* islands for discussion if you take them as absurd sitcom sets: stand here, shake hands, negotiate the subject-matter, get hot-headed and loud (play the canned laughter).

Of course, there is a problem central to Gillick's proposition: his pieces – especially when exhibited in group shows – tend to function as decorative backdrops. It's easy to ignore the titles, and even easier to ignore the references. Gillick has stated several times that he is not disturbed by this perception of the work, and that the suggestion of

'routine' and 'ambience' are welcome qualities. 'Perhaps that's an easy way out of the difficult problem of saying something substantial and embedding it in a concrete form. Then again, you might argue that this is *exactly* the situation all cultural artefacts find themselves in today: nothing can possibly embody all its possible meanings. So, why not make artworks which look like ambient design, and to a certain extent *are* ambient design, but wrong-foot you if you try to read them this way? It is, perhaps, an achievement that the hierarchies of different fields of production are being thwarted by the new academic discipline of 'Visual Culture', but it shouldn't be assumed that all cultural artefacts are automatically impreg-

nated with all the coded data necessary to decipher their broader cultural meaning. Gillick sends this belief – along with the easy opposition between the 'Conceptual' and the 'Retinal' – into the yawning gap he has opened up between opaque visuality and fractured meanings. It could be argued that the 'Fine Arts' ritually attempt to negotiate back their lost privilege with a rhetoric of contextual complication. But it may be the other way round: that other fields of visual production have equal contextual complexity in their back pockets – a Hip-Hop video might, for example, open up a chasm between visual legibility and a consciously coded suggestion of 'it's a black thing, you wouldn't understand'.

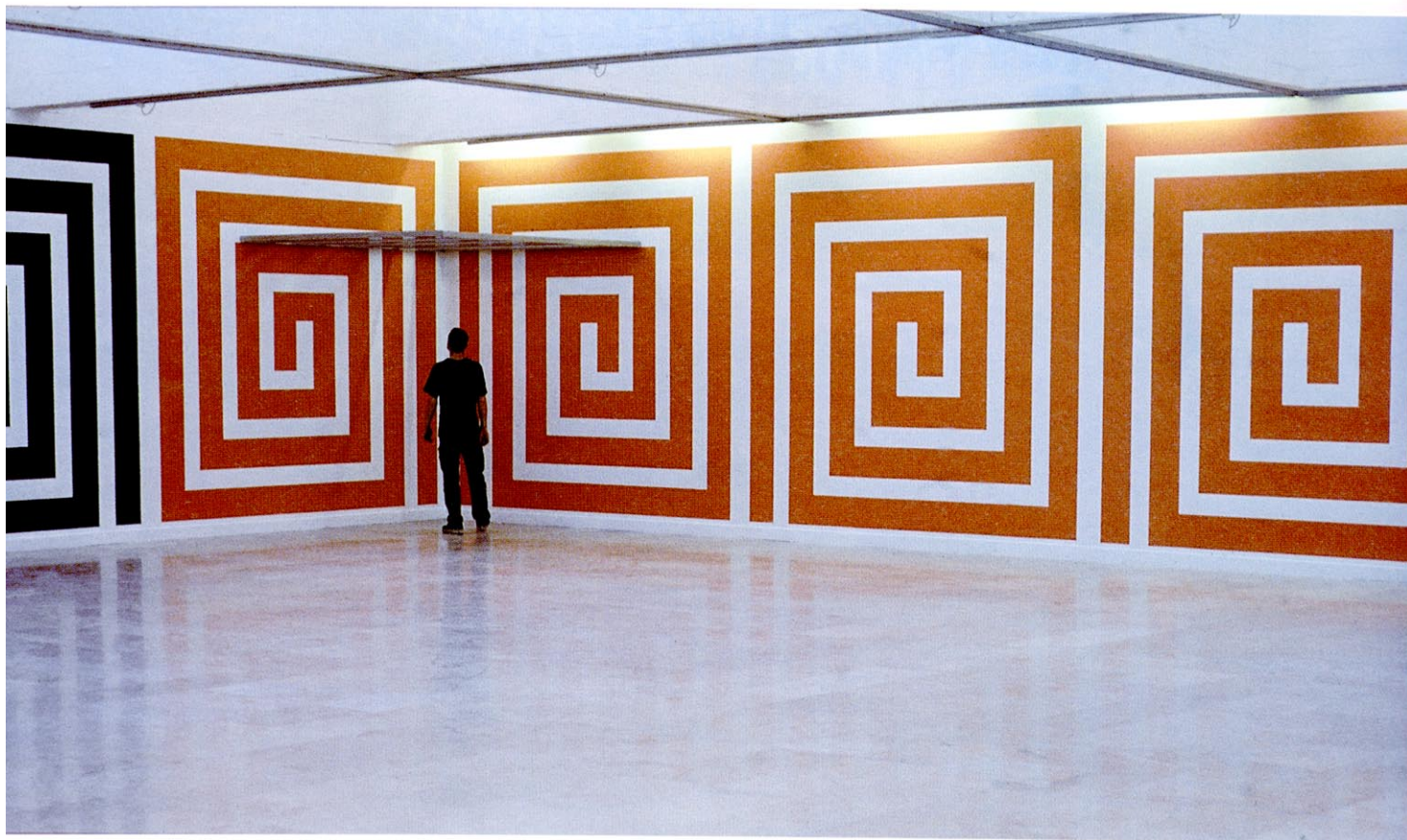
Applied Resignation Platform 1999  
Anodised aluminium, Perspex  
Dimensions variable

Gillick's approach has a rather productive problem at its heart: once you have got the references, the elegant design becomes a nuisance that wants to entangle you in a brain-racking discussion about, say, early Socialism and late Capitalism as seen through the eyes of a Georgian opium-eater.<sup>2</sup> It's like CNN boss Ted Turner thinking he had married a nice aerobics instruc-

bility of his work being misread, either as ambience souped-up with theory or theory dressed-down as ambience.

The show's title was 'David'. Nothing alarming about that, it's not the first time Gillick has used a proper name in a title. But 'David' is also the name Stanley Kubrick had in mind for the central character – a little robot boy – of his unrealised

nothing spectacular really, but the glass was definitely oversized (more like a vase) and it was placed on the bare floor in a dramatic triangle arrangement with a schematic aluminium shell of a hi-fi amplifier the size of a sofa – *David (Prototype Sound System)*, all works 1999 – and a slightly Sol LeWitt-ish aluminium cage with differently coloured fabrics on its



Revision/22nd Floor Wall Design 1998  
Acrylic paint, anodised aluminium, Perspex  
Dimensions variable

You might argue that the situation in which all cultural artefacts find themselves today is one where nothing can conceivably embody all of its possible meanings. Why not make artworks which look like ambient design, and to a certain extent *are* ambient design, but wrong-foot you if you try to read them this way?

tor, who turned out to be a canny media politician with an anti-Vietnam War past that wasn't as easy to ignore as he thought. Which is to say: Gillick runs the risk that the subject-matter of his writings is perceived as the kind of background noise your average Ted has to separate himself from. Gillick's recent exhibition at the Kunstverein Frankfurt acknowledged that these elements of the work need to be emphasised in order to counter the possi-

science fiction film about artificial intelligence. Thus, the show could be read as a possible abstract film set for Kubrick's project. But if you didn't catch the cinematic reference, what would remain beyond the beautifully finished industrial surfaces? When you stepped into the show, it seemed to gravitate around one small element that was not easily integrated into the equation: a glass filled with red liquid which smelled like a Bloody Mary. It was

floor – *David (Temporary Location Rig)*. There was an uncomfortable feeling about the glass, as if it was the remains of a Brett Easton Ellis giant fixing himself a hangover cure; or a butcher drinking blood in a steely, hygienic environment. But although the colour itself symbolises blood, it is not a proper *symbol* that Gillick offers you to sip from – little robot boys don't drink, they don't have blood, and they are not giants. The title for the glass

is *David (He Doesn't Turn to See Her)*, and one of the possible endings Kubrick had thought of for his script was showing the boy preparing a drink for his mother, while turning away from the camera in a typical cinematic gesture. But take away all these coded allusions to Kubrick's sick story about a robot boy replacing a dead girl in a family triangle, and there still



*David (He Doesn't Turn to See Her)* 1999  
Glass, Bloody Mary

remains something monstrous. The glass is a twisted signifier that inverts itself, flagging itself firstly as a design element, then as something clean, yet somehow stained, without being 'abject'.

'What's the scenario?', Gillick asks in a text entitled 'Prevision. Should the future help the past?'.<sup>3</sup> He answers: 'A constantly mutating sequence of possibilities. Add a morsel of difference and the results slip out of control.' With regard to 'David', the glass was the single morsel that made you *look awry*, like the Queen in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, on the entire, seemingly controlled, situation. The photos on the wall in the next room, *David (Calendar and Location Shoot)*, for example: a nice 70s housing project, an artificial lake – it's all a

bit empty. I wonder if I would have realised without the Kubrick reference that this was Thamesmead, the London location of the scene in *Clockwork Orange* (1971) in which gang leader Malcom McDowell beats his mutinous boys without warning, cutting the hand of the weakest to reinstate the pecking order. Opposite the photos, the larger part of the space is blocked by a plywood fence covered in soft, multi-coloured burlap: *David (Provisional Backdrop Title Projection)*. The utopian promise of the urban housing project, ripped apart in the dystopian film, is finally fenced in by a coloured wall which looks like it's straight out of a *Bugs Bunny* cartoon. It becomes apparent that the references to Kubrick are not so much borrowed imaginative capital but a pragmatically used filter to reintroduce an element of visceral discontent into the ambient space. It is a discontent which remains when you take the references away – the way you see these objects will never be the same.

It is crucial not to perceive this aspect of Gillick's work as a gesture of transgression. In the artworld, transgression usually functions as a symbolic echo of its most schematic class constellation: the upper class collector is 'thrilled' that a lower middle class grammar-school boy pretending to be a sub-proletarian screams insults at him (literally or through the medium of art objects). Instead, Gillick offers the dramatisation of the mediocre: even Kubrick's unrealised project sounds like it would have been a late disaster of a slightly overrated techie director; the work *David (Soundtrack)* could double as a nice home arrangement, referencing film music through a couple of clever samples, with the speakers, CD player and amplifier placed on futuristically-coloured Perspex panes on the floor. But the actual components look too much like they have been picked from a hi-fi-fetishist magazine, and the raffia roller blinds in front of the windows only add to the effect. With a 'morsel of difference' in mind, the world looks uncannily familiar today.

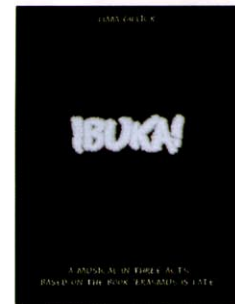
1. Liam Gillick, *McNamara Papers, Erasmus and Ibuka! Realisations, The What If? Scenarios, Le Consortium Dijon and Kunstverein Hamburg*, 1997, p. 82
2. As in the various ways the book *Erasmus is Late*, Book-Works, London, 1995, has been incorporated in exhibitions from 1995 onwards.
3. Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, *Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1998; reprinted in Liam Gillick, *Five or Six*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 1999, pp. 25-40



*Five or Six* 1999



*Erasmus is Late* 1995



*Ibuka!* 1995



*Big Conference Centre* 1997



*McNamara Papers, Erasmus and Ibuka! Realisations, The What If? Scenarios* 1997

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