

TORONTO

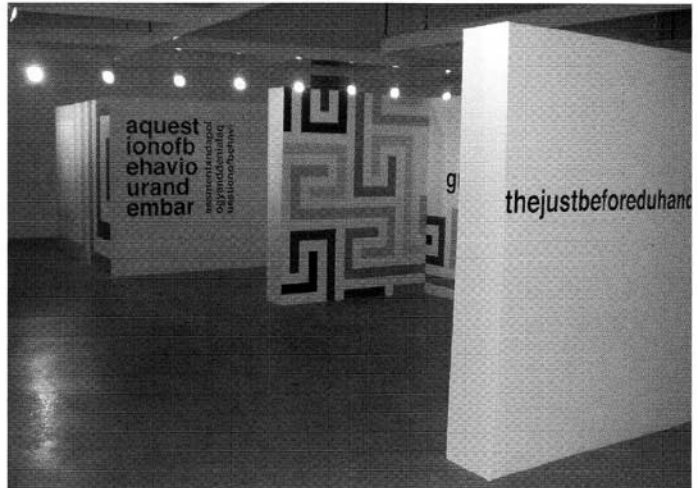
LIAM GILICK

THE POWER PLANT

For the last ten years Liam Gillick has been preoccupied with the construction of the social. His spare, cerebral installations investigate relationships between artistic practice and the networked systems that establish the social realm—written language, iconography, economics, architecture, design, and, particularly, the elusive notion of “place.” Gillick’s work is always articulated within a retro-avant-garde vocabulary of Minimalism

and modernism, with explicit affinities to Donald Judd, Dan Graham, Barnett Newman, El Lissitzky, and Piet Mondrian, among others. These references to previous avant-garde practices themselves bring to mind the breakdown of borders among disciplines, thwarted social revolutions, and historical attempts to attain the ideal political condition—utopia.

“Communes, bars and greenrooms” was the latest product of Gillick’s ongoing exploration of these themes. The exhibition consisted of two adjacent spaces: a low, white labyrinth and a long, high-ceilinged gallery whose floor was covered with opalescent black glitter. On the walls of the former were repeating fragments of sentences, all words run together (like Carl Andre’s text-pattern pieces) and printed on vinyl in a no-frills Helvetica typeface. Alongside the text were painted rectangles, squares, and representations of labyrinths in different shades of gray. On the floor were entropic traces of black glitter scattered by those who walked through the installation, whose actions made the entire situation into a dialectic of displacement (like the children in Robert Smithson’s allegory of entropy, who play in a sandbox filled with white sand in one half, black sand in the other, and irrevocably mix up the two parts).



Liam Gillick, “communes, bars, and greenrooms,” 2003.
Installation view.

The exhibition’s title and text fragments come from Gillick’s recent book *Literally No Place*, which references both utopia (the literal translation from the Greek is “no place”) and “literalism” as employed in “Art and Objecthood,” the 1967 essay in which Michael Fried defines Minimalism as an essentially theatrical paradigm: “The literalist preoccupation with time—more precisely, with the *duration of the experience*—is, I suggest, paradigmatically theatrical: as though theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of *time*; or as though the sense which, at bottom, theatre addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, *simultaneously approaching and receding*.” It’s possible to read Gillick’s project as a narrative about the process of constructing utopia—an act permanently stuck (or lost) between “simultaneously approaching and receding” time. And Gillick’s use of “literal,” which was originally employed by Fried as a pejorative term, expresses the artist’s self-conscious ambivalence about art’s ability to directly affect the sociopolitical (i.e., “real”) world.

In 1967 Judd stated that “order underlies, overlies, is within, above, below or beyond everything.” Although he owes a

great debt to Judd, Gillick’s sense of order is less idealized, less complete, intentionally theatrical, overtly social, complex, and fleeting. In a world where “Judd-like” has become an adjective to describe the latest simple, blocky design item, this exhibition raises the question as to whether Gillick is mourning the loss of an avant-garde with a social vision (i.e., an art practice that can critically affect the social realm) or if he’s attempting to revive that tradition. Somehow, the answer is both.

—Michael Meredith