



SEEING RED

Let me begin by saying that my May 21 resignation statement [discussed in Liam Gillick's article "Terms of Engagement," *Artforum*, September 2006] was meant as a blow struck while making a strategic exit; as a blow and not a *criticism* it would have lost much of its sense were it not for the actions that followed the resignation, including withdrawal of tax dollars from the war economy of the United States and withholding of cultural capital from its sidekick art subculture. A great many readers with political sympathies *outside* that subculture have expressed solidarity with the statement and actions. Those on the *inside* of that subculture—in particular those subscribing to the "critical" positions the statement identifies as opportunistic—are a different matter. That group frequently takes issue with the statement. Is this surprising? Hardly, the statement targeted the group among its readers. The relation between the character and the "demographic" of the responses is almost mathematical. Let us look, then, at the range of these

responses, not to show that they make no sense but to show what sense they make—that is, the positions and ideologies they would promote:

1. *The curator is standing in front of the work.* This is the petit bourgeois *arch* response (present in Liam Gillick's *Artforum* article and Martha Rosler's comments on Nettime). The position here and the relevant ideology are that the work—or in some variants the artist or self-institution—has an agency independent from its exhibition context or should have greater agency with respect to its institutional context. Though often cloaked in the trappings of autonomism, this position is the functional centerpiece of a familiar breed of petit bourgeois "radicalism." Typical of the latter category, it is basically an escapist position inasmuch as it imagines a retreat from, or projects a magical advance beyond, an era of "unhealthy" hyperinstitutionalization and overmediation. The position frequently involves going so far as to make the exhibition-as-institution invisible, which is to misunderstand—and occlude rather than analyze—the current state of late-capitalist institu-

tional development. Hence, in Gillick's article I am said to be imposing or attempting to impose an "institutional voice" on the work. This is correct: The exhibition is an institution; it exists and has an agency that cannot be ignored—moreover an agency in which any meaningful politics of contemporary art in the global North is to be located. But Gillick's evident meaning, via a common conflation, is that I was claiming the Berkeley Art Museum's (!) solidarity with revolutionary Venezuela, rather than claiming the relation of solidarity for the distinct entity of the "Now-Time Venezuela" exhibition. That this too-sparsely ontology is underpinned by a picture of a simpler, "healthier" (and of course fundamentally economic) exchange between artist and museum is signaled by Gillick's soft and hopeful attitude toward the museum in question, which he praises for being "supportive"; at the Berkeley Art Museum, he maintains, "it might be possible to shift the terms of engagement" (presumably, if not only, through a future project involving his work!).

2. *The curator, while correct on some level, should operate more horizontally and bring more people along.* This position (present in Pauline's letter on Metamute as well as Sarah Lewison's response on the same website) is the "micropolitical," postmodern criticism. It is a tendency that, inasmuch as it frequently comes with gender-based and (apparent, if erroneous) class-based agendas, deserves some sympathy. To this tendency may also be assigned the majority of US and European Zapatism, the bulk of great-nation anarchist positions, and the range of wholly academic "postrevolutionary planning" approaches. Yet the past few decades have shown irrefutably—in a way that thinkers of all political inclinations have not hesitated to point out—how these positions function to support the very imperialist system they nominally oppose. That is, while anarchists, postrevolutionary plan-

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ners, and advocates of microrevolution focus on the construction of the good society before taking power—or in some cases are not at all interested in taking power—they remain manipulated and controlled by those in power. Yet one doesn't make a revolution (except a yoga or shopping revolution) without taking power: A revolution proceeds by stages, and to put the micropolitical before the macropolitical (fatally) reverses that order.

3. *The statement is obvious, what it argues for is obvious.* This position (present in a letter to the *Berkeley Daily Planet* and also in Gillick's article, which mixes sometimes contradictory positions) amounts to a not very subtle variant of the postrevolutionary planning tendency (2). It rejects the statement's claims on the grounds that they are too familiar. For Ariel Parkinson, the letter writer to the *Daily Planet* who found the statement's claims to be both "irrefutable" and "platitudes," we have heard it all before and are working on other things. Likewise, near the end of his article, Gillick suggests that the statement's conclusions are other people's starting point. This tendency is mentalistic (virtually solipsistic), and it is continuous with the Hegelian idealist positions that Marx criticized with his adoption and elaboration of materialism some 165 years ago. The position says: Because we have thought of it and thought much about it, we are on to the next thing. To respond to this tendency with finality one need only paraphrase Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: The point is not to interpret the world but to change it. Neither the "obviousness" of imperialism, nor the "obviousness" of exploitation of one class by another under capitalism mean that we should focus on *less obvious* and *less central* matters, until imperialism and capitalism are defeated.

4. *The statement is hypocritical.* Its author, as Pauline on Metamute points out, goes on working (for example, he organized a project continued on page 54

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with Latin American media activists entitled “Exhibiting US Imperialism and War” at the Gwangju Biennale); additionally, she “just can’t imagine [his] rejecting curatorial practice tout court.” This position confuses the shift in strategy the statement calls for with purism or what Lenin would call infantilism. Yet the statement does not promote the idea that one should not work any further in the art context or should preserve the purity of one’s trajectory as a moral example. In its penultimate paragraph, the statement clearly assigns value to the idea of creating “disruptions and explosions” within an art-institutional context (and it is hard to see the “Exhibiting US Imperialism and War” project in US-dominated South Korea as anything but explosive), though it identifies these interventions as something other than the primary site of struggle.

To elaborate further on the central question of participation and nonparticipation, the key question is one of strategy. The bourgeois art context, like a bourgeois “democratic” parliament, may be considered at some times and in some contexts as a useful site for representation for revolutionary struggles and social movements. It is important that these movements, which of course have a much broader scope than the cultural, do not hold visibility in such contexts to be anything but minorly instrumental to their ends. It is also important that they do not treat the *means* available in these contexts (primarily persuasion) as the exclusive methods for advancing revolutionary struggle. The complete inversion of any meaningful relation of alignment with revolutionary struggle or with the social movements makes it a vast understatement to say that there is simply an error of focus or emphasis here for those currently working in the art context. Instead, there is a systematic erasure that amounts to a position of negation vis-à-vis the social movements and is in practice equivalent to being opposed to revolution.

Having addressed the range of critical positions—(1) those longing for greater agency for the individual artist or self-

institution (a petit bourgeois cultural attitude that projects a moment beyond or before the “overinstitutionalization” of culture); (2) those putting the micro-political before the macropolitical (opportunism flying under the flag of progressive postmodernism); (3–4) those confusing the moral and purely intellectual with the practical and political (aristocratic, “clean hands” academicism)—we may restate the position of the statement in the form of the negation of the above. The statement holds that revolutionary struggles are not primarily cultural ones, that cultural institutions (such as museums and *Artforum*) are part of a deeply corrupt bourgeois representational context, but to target them (or their endemic corruption) as the primary site of struggle is not radical in that it does not go to the root of the problem. The primary mode of struggle is one that operates on the political and economic base—a struggle that holds constantly in view the taking of power and is ready to apply violent force to obtain and maintain it.

How shall we name that position (other than the negation of opportunism)? Gramsci, writing in prison under censorship, was forced to redescribe the Marxism-Leninism he admired and embraced. He called it the *philosophy of praxis*. This strikes me as a good description of the incisive postphilosophical science that Marx articulated and Lenin continued. That the philosophy of praxis remains an invaluable ideological tool for advancing and clarifying revolutionary practice is evident both on the large scale (analysis of the global situation of imperialism as Cira Pascual Marquina and I argued in our Gwangju catalogue essay) and on the small scale from its capacity to identify the errors in the service of bourgeois ends that nearly the whole of the art subculture’s positions represent.

To reiterate: Our position regarding cultural work does not hold that interventions in bourgeois-controlled contexts (including contemporary art of the global North) are for some reason “off-limits”—this would be to give such

contexts more credit than they deserve. Rather it holds that (1) representation there is far from being of central value, and (2) moreover it is not valuable at all unless it accompanies revolutionary organization and aligns with actually existing revolutionary movements such as Venezuela's Bolivarian process, Bolivia's Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), and Brazil's Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). One should remember that the sine qua non of effective cultural and intellectual work is the taking and disseminating of clearly articulated and consistent ideological positions—positions that, inasmuch as they emerge from and are primarily disseminated through practices of popular communication and education (rather than the practices of the art subculture) can become the foci of effective class struggle.

—Chris Gilbert
Caracas, Venezuela

LIAM GILLICK RESPONDS:

Chris Gilbert elaborately extends his rhetoric, and it remains engaging if just a tad prescriptive, to put it mildly. One little thing before we exit the “deeply corrupt bourgeois representational context” of Artforum: The fact that Gilbert has come to the conclusion that is many people’s starting point does not imply others are caught in a permanent process of moving “on to the next thing,” however elegant his 165-year-old reference points might be when neatly filtered through his remarkable brain. A starting point is philosophically (literally and metaphorically) bound to subsequent points. It does not and should not imply a stylistically postmodern separation into chunks of cultural amnesia.

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION

Regarding Liam Gillick's article on Chris Gilbert I am reminded of the studio musician who, after working on a Stones album in the '70s, was quoted as

saying of Mick Jagger, “. . . and this twerp is taken seriously as the devil or something?” Yes, we are all horrified by the state of our political environment and are all desperate to find some reason for optimism. But, please, let's not go so far as to make self-glorifying, deluded naïfs like Gilbert our heroes. All the politically correct writers rushing to put Gilbert forward as the standard-bearer of progressive thought should have been here in the Bay Area while he was running amok.

It is always amusing to observe those who appoint themselves to speak “for the workers” while gallivanting around the world, leaving their coworkers back home to do the actual labor that makes their glory-hounding possible. But it was not so amusing to be at the public panel discussion at the Berkeley Art Museum on the occasion of Gilbert's first exhibition. When several Venezuelan audience members expressed concerns about political events in their country, Gilbert and his supporters shouted them down in true Stalinist fashion. What's more, at that same panel discussion, in response to a question from Peter Selz [Berkeley Art Museum's founding director] about Allan Sekula's work, Gilbert stated that he no longer took much interest in art and that his curatorial program would continue to be solely in solidarity with “creative” revolutionary activity. He then went on to scold those members of the audience who were not working for the revolution.

Finally, the leadership of the Berkeley museum is now being routinely slandered. They hired Gilbert and supported him, even after he announced that his first year's program would be exclusively about the revolution in Venezuela. His departure in a fit of pique over business-as-usual museum negotiations was a romantic gesture that relieved him of the responsibility of actually working at being a curator in an art museum, and allowed him to hoist himself onto his own pedestal.

—Renny Pritikin
Director, Nelson Gallery
University of California, Davis