

# Art

MONTHLY

MARCH 09 / No 324 / UK £4.40 US\$7.40

Liam Gillick  
Interviewed by John Slyce

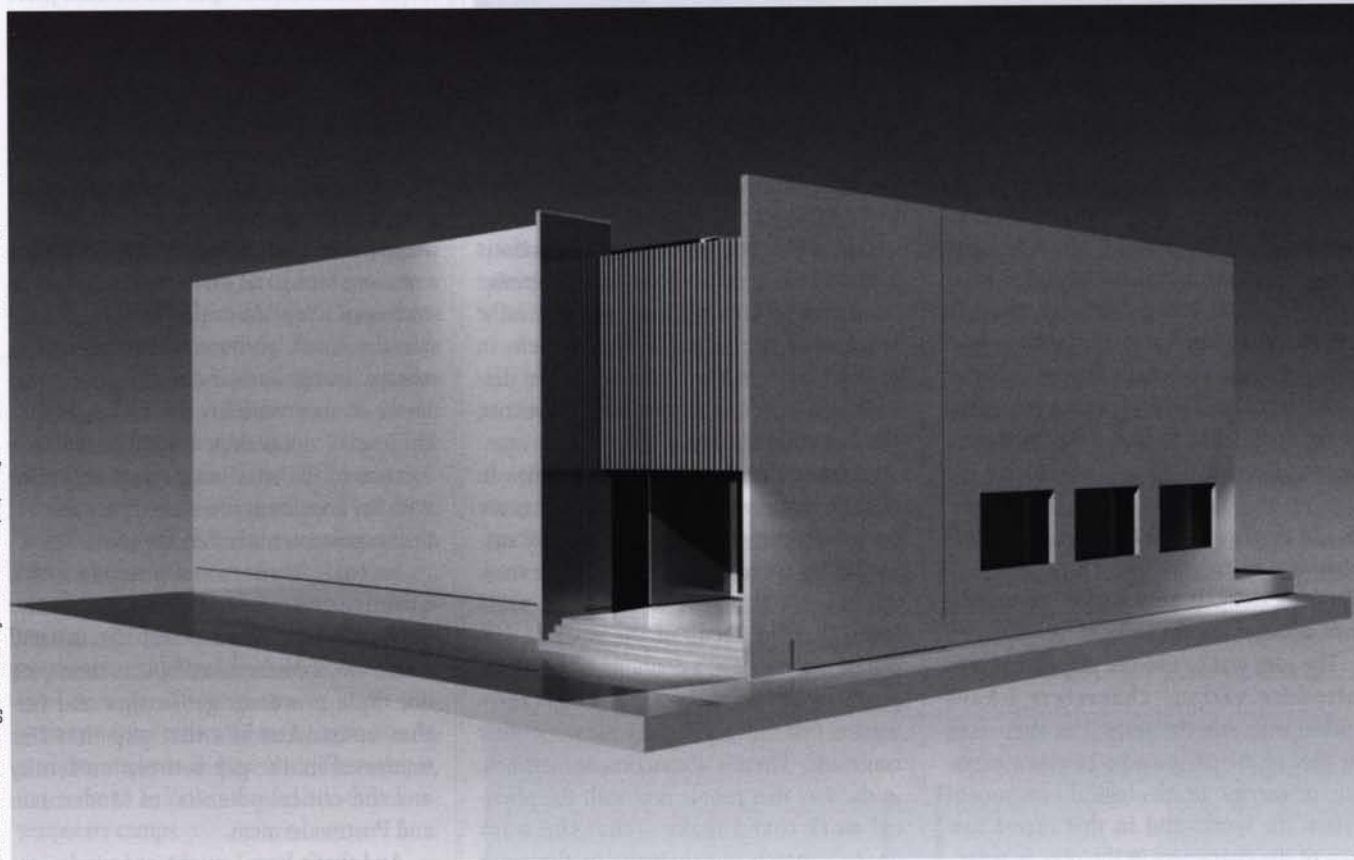
The Interview as Art  
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# Recuperating MODERNISM



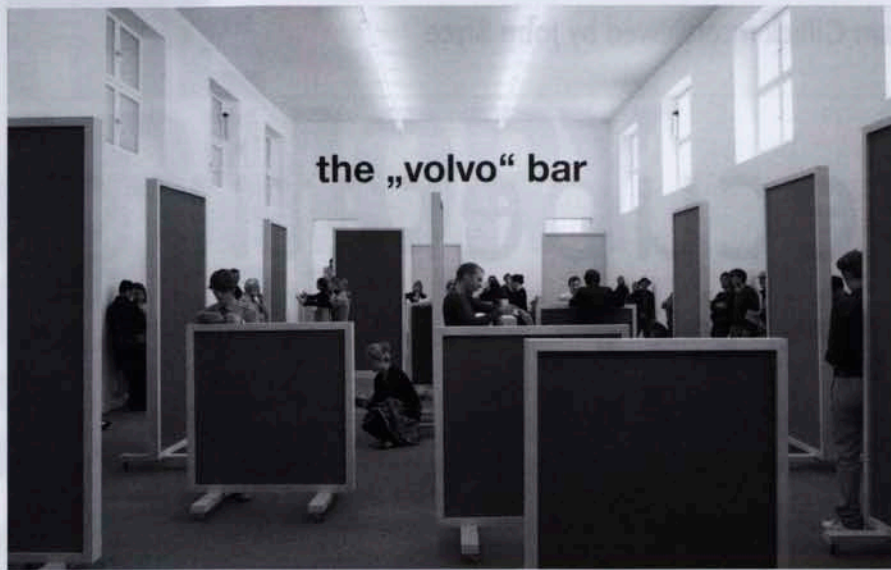
Liam Gillick Rendering for a model of Arnold Bode's proposal for the German Pavilion, Venice, 1938. 2009

**JOHN SLYCE:** *SHALL WE BEGIN BY LOOKING AT THE RETROSPECTIVE? How did things come together at the Kunstverein in Munich? I understand you staged a play?*

**Liam Gillick:** The Munich aspect of the show is really the production part of the retrospective project.

Everything else – in Zurich, Chicago and Rotterdam – had a somewhat dark quality, and I didn't get my hands dirty or get deeply engaged in the execution of the structures. In Zurich, Chicago and Rotterdam I gave back 50% of the space to each institution to deal with and use to address the work over the last 20 years. For Munich I thought it would be a good reflection of my practice to make one part of this retrospective absolutely production-orientated. And, of course, a play is literally a production. It's the aspect of the retrospective where I asked for certain elements to be put into place, including people – I worked with 15 actors. I had a basic outline of what this play would be and I had a basic structure in the gallery, but beyond that I didn't know the precise details until I got there.





Liam Gillick A Volvo Bar Kunstverein Munich

That's taken me back, really, to my original way of working, which is a developed form of the Seth Siegelau idea of sending artists to shows and not art. I put myself into the position I was in back in 1990 when I'd go to Nice and I'd work out what to do when I got there. It put me somewhat on the spot. I had to find a way to stage a play – in German.

**JS:** *To produce a production in a post-production mode?*

**LG:** Yes, exactly. It went on for two months or so, a longer run than a lot of real plays get.

The idea was to use the play as a way to introduce various characters I have worked with over the years. I've often used the idea of the person who carries a narrative, or carries an ideological component within the work, and in this case I saw each of the characters in the play as potentially having multiple functions. They were, in a way, a group of people that I might have worked with over the years (or certain curators and artists), but at the same time they were also all one person – and they were also all me.

**JS:** *And what is the historical time of the play?*

**LG:** It is set on the day of the birth of the main character. Not a birthday but literally the day of birth. But it is also set in the present, in a bar next to a Volvo factory – hence the title *A Volvo Bar*. Some of the locations are also the Kunstverein itself. So the director's office, for example, is one of the locations – not literally; it is just one of the places that gets talked about. The basic outline is: there's a bar next to a

Volvo factory and a man arrives on the day of his birth and interacts with various characters in the bar. They describe power relationships and locations which are the location of the play: the Kunstverein in Munich and at the same time the discourse is generated from the perspective of a bar in Sweden.

Structurally, it makes perfect sense in relation to my work – the idea that you are both forced to address the current surroundings (because that's where the work is), but you also have to accept, at some level, that the focus of the work is displaced. So you have a doubling of reference points in relation to the site and this causes tension that mirrors the way my work often functions. There's a concern, sometimes, in the way that people deal with the physical work that I make – that the work doesn't match my rhetoric, or the work doesn't seem to match the words. I've always wondered in which period of history art has literally matched what was said about it, in a precise way. I mean, that's what is interesting about art: the attempt to constantly redescribe the artwork, or redescribe what it is doing.

**JS:** *Can we look more closely at the issue of avoiding the transparent message or direct access to meaning in the work. I've never had the sensation that there's a mismatch or disconnect between word and object in the work. In fact, that's the relationship set up. Can you talk about your wish to avoid that kind of transparency, even as far back as 1990 when you were looking at documentary forms?*

**LG:** There are very clear reasons for this

apparent avoidance. On an idealistic level, the only way you can use art is as a fragmented mirror of the complexity of contemporary society and you try to produce a system of art production that is just as multifaceted and potentially misleading, based on a series of parallels. This was my main revelation at art school – the idea of art production as a series of parallels. Michael Craig-Martin used to talk about the idea that instead of his work having a style within a trajectory of late Modernism, he – the artist – would be the common factor in his art. This would free him up; allow him to do many different things. Now, of course, his work has become more consolidated and recognisably his – but initially it jumped around a lot.

Yet, if you emerged during a period of difference – of revised forms of identity and new understandings about relativism in relation to cultural meaning and social structure – then of course you wouldn't be happy with just saying, 'Well, I'll be the common factor and I'll let the work find its own way'. You must also dissolve a little bit, too, as an author. While the work is always heavily authored up to a point, the sense of responsibility for authorship, or the level of authorship, is questionable. The location of the art moment does not reside with my consistent presence. It can exist at different moments within the work.

In early Modernism you can see a quite urgent exchange between the process of modernity and the critical reflection of Modernism but, as time goes on, these processes get further and further apart. And it's that gap that I'm interested in: the gap between modernity and the critical potential of Modernism and Postmodernism.

And that's how I might end up designing a shelf, for example, which is what I have been doing recently. It is not because I'm interested in design alone, and it is not because I'm interested in art and architecture. It is because the act of designing a shelf has a very particular meaning if you are operating in this gap between modernity and Modernism. This explains a lot about the work, I think.

I always used to say that I was more interested in Anni Albers than Josef Albers, and this remains true. I am more interested in the applied forms of Modernism, the attempt to have a much more functional role in relation to daily life; but I also want to operate in an art context. I don't want to operate in the textile world or in the world of applied art. I was quite



influenced – even as a student – by Swiss artists like Richard Paul Lohse, who might make posters for the public transport system and produce reductive abstract paintings, both as equal aspects of his practice. This seemed extremely interesting to me: the idea that you could operate in a terrain where it might be normal for you to be doing these different tasks but operating from the perspective of being an artist.

People describe me – as they did during the Vincent Award at the Stedelijk Museum the other day – as, ‘critic, writer, designer, artist’. And I think this is odd because these things they are referring to are all part of my art production. The problem, historically, is that this might be a big claim to make. So I don’t necessarily mean it in a profound way. I just mean that my artistic practice includes these approaches as different forms not supplemental activities.

**JS:** *Yes. But it is a condition of that polymathic existence that people have to understand what one does – if you do multifaceted things – as a hyphenated kind of entity. Maybe it is related to the problem of why people feel that they have to ‘get it’, or at least should be able ‘get it’; that there should be a one-to-one relationship with what is before the viewer – whether that be Liam Gillick as artist or the work that Liam Gillick produces.*

**LG:** Just for the sake of argument, if you try to describe what art could be – drawing only on extremes of artistic practice now – and you cut out all the bits that are ambiguous and annoying, the extremes would be a kind of transparent documentary form on the one hand, and a form of super self-consciousness, super subjectivity on the other. When I meet with my graduate students in New York, for example, they seem to be loosely divided into these contemporary camps.

**JS:** *Neither pole of the art practices you describe dodges the problem of ‘getting it’.*

**LG:** Yes, because I make use of both strategies, in a way. There’s an acute super-subjective element to the work and there is also an extreme clarity about certain things, but the work as a whole is not intended to fulfill either of those two extremes of contemporary art fully. It steps a little outside simple binarism.

I’ve just been writing a text about the idea of the discursive as the basis of dynamic art production in the last few years. I think this is a better way of describing relational practice than talking about some kind of interactive or social component. The idea that art comes out through negotiation, not through sitting alone at home with a piece of paper and how this discursive potential of art can be sustained over time.

**JS:** *I think there’s more access to the subjective content in your work through your writing. Maybe the real interest of this play is that it will make visible, in a non-writerly way, exactly those kinds of writerly activities and subjectivities. It strikes me as a kind of Erasmus Is Late proposition, but as a play, not directly as a text.*

**LG:** Yes, and it has shifted to the recent past because I am looking at the idea of ‘the moment’ that could have been – the ultimate postwar moment. For example, take a random date like June 17 1974, when the mode of production in the Volvo factory was perfect, when the idea of new forms of teamwork hadn’t yet turned into a form of flexibility that led inevitably to redundancy. I am interested in ‘setting’ my work on the day before this all dissolves into a neo-liberal farce.

So my play is set on that day. It is set on an ideal day in Sweden when Calvinist, good, hard-working low-church values have produced a system that is viewed as exemplary, as a way of retaining forms of honest capitalism, good production, teamworking and flexible working practices. But the action takes place in a bar. And they don’t have bars at Volvo factories.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot recently, the idea that certain modes of thinking and certain modes or models of art production – even curating and critical writing – are really deeply steeped in some of the postwar structures that led to Volvo’s teamwork and flexibility. Starting at playgroup, through to the way you’re taught to work in teams at school, and

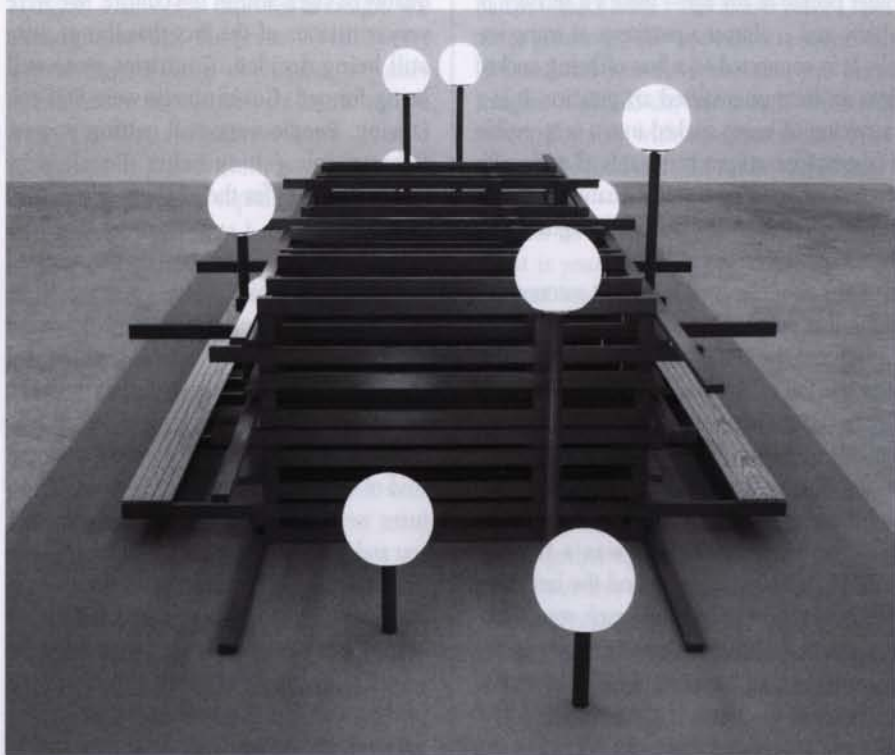
on to the workplace with its projects and projections. I am trying to look again at some of these questions. If we assume that the postwar period is a completed moment – historically – then how do we re-engage with the better aspects of ameliorated working conditions? How can we continue to work in a discursive manner if its basis merely prepared everyone for redundancy? Can we find a way to accept difference and work collectively?

**JS:** *Those are fundamental and very heavy questions. How would you describe your strategy or approach to posing – let alone answering – such questions?*

**LG:** Most of my work on this question came from looking through Brazilian academic papers about progressive working practices in Scandinavia, which tells you quite a lot about my working method. In a fairly undirected way, I just read South American academic papers about innovations in Volvo car production in the 70s. The work was made while thinking about these things. Sometimes works are produced under the influence of thinking about something when I made them, though this influence never manifests itself in a direct, didactic way.

**JS:** *Yet it doesn’t come forward as a decoy? Many practices position work as research, but what comes forward is fundamentally a decoy that even sends you back to the original research, only to*

Liam Gillick *Quarter Scale Model of a Social Structure for a Plaza in Guadalajara 2005*





>> The only way you can use art is as a fragmented mirror of the complexity of contemporary society and you try to produce a system of art production that is just as multifaceted and potentially misleading. This was my main revelation at art school – the idea of art production as a series of parallels.

*spiral off somewhere else.*

**LG:** Yes, but in the press release for my show in New York – I quite enjoy writing press releases, they're getting more and more ludicrous – I mentioned some of this stuff and in the more mainstream reviews of the show, of course, people simply didn't get it. I didn't say that it was an exhibition illustrating the conditions of car production in Sweden in the 70s – far from it. I said the work was made while considering these ideas – that's a totally different thing. Even then, however, you are faced with shiny metal objects and overreaching statements, which in my mind is quite a precise parallel to car production and consumption.

**JS:** *What is the function then of the original research material, or even a press release, or critical writing on the work by yourself or others, if not an extension to the experience of the art?*

**LG:** It is interesting. There's always a subtext in the work – and it is not just in my work, I think you see it in the work of some of the other people of my age – there's a mixture of clarity and ... almost a petulance at some levels. It is connected to a fear of being sucked into an instrumentalised art practice. It is a suspicion of being sucked into a responsible Habermasian art practice that is all to do with everyone having perfect information and contributing to an even-handed dialogue about how to produce a better society.

I am also interested in artistic autonomy. I think that people like myself, who were born in between the end of the Second World War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, saw a lot of other things happening that made us not entirely 100% sure about anything. The period of the IRA, the Red Brigades and the permanent threat of nuclear annihilation led to a distrust of transparency. It was a time of subterfuge and conspiracy and the last thing you might want to do is telegraph your intentions to the dominant culture by merely parroting or mirroring the worst of it. We wanted to make use of the products of the postwar period as social spaces and spaces for art and so on,

but not necessarily to go along with that completely. We wanted an interventionist strategy, whereby sites both literal and metaphorical could be appropriated. Production would be the focus of critique, not consumption.

I wanted to look at all this and to make the complexity of the built world and its manipulation the subject of the art. And I think that's true throughout my work from the beginning – even when I was collaborating with Henry Bond in the early 90s on documentary photos in response to daily updates from the Press Association. We used our self-consciousness about our backgrounds, gender, appearance and access to higher education to get into closed events. We didn't want to separate ourselves from the production of events within society in a postmodern way. We were always silent at these events. We never asked any questions. I remember at the time thinking that we were not happy to just go away and make art that was purely an ironic response to the ecstasy of communication or the imploded quality of signs within the culture. We were very conscious of the fact that things were still being decided. Countries were still being formed. Governments were still collapsing. People were still getting poorer. Other people getting richer. People were still being jailed for their beliefs. We wanted to go and check.

As artists we did not take up the accepted role in society, which was to go away and be involved in increasing diversity and increasing production of difference. Instead, we wanted to go – for a short while – to what might be called the centres of power and to see who was still there and how they were working. And of course we found that the power structures were rolling along quite nicely thank you and hadn't succumbed to the 'matrix'. We were also of course following on from people like Allan Sekula and others, who had already been working in this way for a long time. But we were doing it without the structural integrity that they might have had in connection to critical theory.

**JS:** *It's important to clarify that you weren't attempting to reinvent a documentary mode.*

**LG:** No, not at all.

**JS:** *Nor to facilitate the implosion of Modernism.*

**LG:** No, and it is very significant that at the time Henry often viewed himself as a photographer, and not as an artist using a camera in order to carry out an agenda. He had an interest in, and knowledge of, the history of photography – of modern photography – and this was crucial. But of course he is also an artist with specialist knowledge and we spent a great deal of time arguing about art while attending a video link between Bill Clinton and the TUC or waiting for ELO in the Soviet Embassy. We wanted to be there at nine o'clock in the morning at the PLO Headquarters in London finding out what was happening, so we needed a photographer – and we had one, as it were.

I'm not trying to totalise the work. I've tried hard to avoid a clear-cut trajectory. But I do think there are some common and recurring factors within the work, and they are connected in equal measure to some scepticism and to some enthusiasm for the products of the postwar period.

**JS:** *Do you think that this mode of life is signalled through these elements of soft modernism that you access in the work?*

**LG:** Yes, because I'm interested in applied modernism. But the thing that doesn't get talked about very much is the idea of autonomous art. Obviously this is a big area, but I'm interested in the potential of art as an exception within the culture. I'm also interested in the production of something that does not necessarily carry enormous claims within its resolved structure, but still occupies a similar territory to things that, in the past, have done that.

I have always been interested in how to be an artist when you don't have any ideas at the beginning – or when you don't have any work to show. I didn't see why that should be an impediment to being involved in the art world or functioning as an artist. The same thing applies to this retrospective. Because the further you go back with some of my work the more unclear and collaborative it gets, and the less you're going to find an originating moment – which is normally what you need for a retrospective. Just because there is no original revelation or breakthrough doesn't mean I can't have a retrospective, but I want one that looks at things structurally rather than historically. I still retain an interest in the art system. The systems of art dissemination and the spaces for



27 November 1990 London England 13.30

Cosmonauts at viewing of new TV series on Soviet achievements in space. BAFTA.

"There are certain systems that use urine, well the system cleans this water, to the level of distilled water, and afterwards this water can be used to produce oxygen."

Henry Bond & Liam Gillick



HENRY BOND & LIAM GILICK

Liam Gillick and Henry Bond *Cosmonauts* 1990

art interest me just as much as the spaces for building a Volvo 240. I view them as another form of construction within the society that also needs to be looked at.

**JS:** *As spaces structured by capital?*

**LG:** The machinations of global capital and social structures, in my adult life, have been centred on capitalising the near future and the recent past. This has been a constant subject of my work. If you can find a way to recuperate and recapitalise the recent past, you're onto a winner. If you can keep recuperating the recent past, you can get closer and closer to the present and find a way to really sell it again – just after it has happened.

This is not about nostalgia. It is literally about recuperating and reorganising. And, of course, the near future is also the terrain of contemporary capital and contemporary organisation, which is why they don't bother building a new building anymore unless there's a real boom. Instead you renovate the foyer or you re-signify the building but you leave the structure the same. You can exchange spaces this way. These are the terrains that I'm really interested in. How the near future is controlled in a chaotic, displaced

socio-economic environment.

Even the work with Henry was about getting a fax from the Press Association at nine o'clock saying that at eleven o'clock today Margaret Thatcher is expected to resign. We already knew that the press – with Henry and me tagging along – were going to gather in two hours' time to wait for her to resign. And it is that speculative zone – and a reclaiming of it away from people who use speculation purely to capitalise on things in an antisocial way – that I remain interested in, stretching those two hours into something more complex. I didn't see why only certain people should be left alone to address ideas of projection, speculation, and the near future. I realised that this could be the subject of my work.

**JS:** *Those are the strategies that lead, in some way, to the criticism of your work as being corporate.*

**LG:** I can understand that. As a student I was always a big fan of Donald Judd's artworks. I've read the reviews from the time he was working and of course he was constantly criticised for echoing late Modernism and for being conveniently in-sync – or even in

cahoots – with the aesthetics of corporate modernism. I'm very conscious of that. It's a proximity that I want. It's not a mistake. For the last ten years I've lived in Midtown Manhattan – that's what I look at every day. I operate in proximity. The work doesn't necessarily sit comfortably in the spaces that you would imagine it should do, nor does it necessarily sit comfortably with a reductive late-Modernism like Judd and Carl Andre and so on.

**JS:** *Can we talk about the Venice Biennale? What is your take on being thrown into the national model of the pavilion just as national brands decline?*

**LG:** Well, my first shows were as the Berlin Wall was coming down and I was on the boat as quickly as possible. I made use of the European context as the last of the old soldier presidents and chancellors were trying to leave it as they'd imagined it – to put it back together again for the first time, as it were. I was very conscious of that negotiation between President Mitterrand and Jack Lang, the way they decentred cultural policy. I was also conscious of the legacy of the federated model of Germany. These were very generative terrains for me to operate in. It meant a



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lot to get away from a centred culture and go to places that were decentred, where they have repetition and multiple iterations of similar things.

The interesting thing about Venice is that it tells you more about the curator than it does about me. Being selected to work in the German pavilion is a gesture by the curator Nicolaus Schafhausen to make a point. In the recent coming together in Berlin of a new international art community and a consolidated identification of a new German art that is complex, professional, successful and public, there have been people who decided to operate within that system without living there. Living there – being a resident – does not make you a German artist. What do we do with the people who operate within this terrain without living here? What do we call them?

I think for Schafhausen, this question of whether you live somewhere is one of the complicated issues of instrumentalised postwar society building. The desire to accept the people that come and live among us is a very strong drive of progressive people in Germany – that we accept our Turkish or Kurdish brothers and sisters as our neighbours and that they should be here and be welcomed. Yet I think he was trying to confuse things even further.

The correct thing to do would be to ask a Turkish or Kurdish German art collective to

do something. But to ask a straight white Anglo-Saxon man to do something means I have to take on board the idea of showing in this building on behalf of another country, I have to ask myself questions about how to continue. Maybe I have to ask myself questions I should have been asking all along. It is a test and a challenge that I cannot answer with my symbolic presence alone. I have to do something. But on another level the invitation does reflect something precise. The very fact that it is tolerable, or it can even be done, shows that in the last 20 years there has been a shift. You could say that, in a way, all the major pavilions of Germany since 1960 have really been about the postwar period. But maybe now ... it is not that we think that the past is hidden but that to continue in that trajectory might become parodic. To put Neo Rauch in the Pavilion or Jonathan Meese – they're both artists who are deeply attractive to the system – would be to continue the endless renegotiation of the postwar period: in Rauch's way, by jumping backwards to a kind of pre-war condition on an allegorical field in the middle of nowhere between Frankfurt Oder and Łódź, and, in Meese's way, by both parodying and making fun of earnest postwar performance art while forcing us to keep remembering something.

I'm thrown into that still-quiet-tense discussion. And of course Berlin, for example, is also peopled by a large number of successful,

well-known, non-German artists who choose to live there. But I'm not one of those either. I think it is a deliberate act on the part of the curator and it's a test. It's like: 'You've worked here a lot and you've continued to be productive here, so here's another German space, see if you can continue in these conditions. Here's a 1938 Nazi building. Are you going to have a discussion or something? What are you going to do?'

And of course the problem now is showing in Italy. This is difficult. If you want to be really tough, you do something about Italy, now. While I was in Venice for the architecture biennale, there was a Lega Nord rally on the waterfront. So while looking around the German Pavilion, I could hear someone ranting about immigrants and gypsies – and this is disturbing. So, whether it is a situation where I can continue as normal, or whether this has to be an exception is very hard to say. This is why I think they asked me – because I have to make a decision about how to function. In a way, I have to ask myself whether I should emphasise the interest I have in the legacy of modernist autonomy that I don't think is complete – an almost Adorno-like belief that you should continue to produce a form of heightened art, a kind of melancholic art of refusal and abstraction – or do you use it to try to continue a dialogue in a place that maybe requires a little silence? ■

**Liam Gillick**, German Pavilion, Venice Biennale, June to November; **Three perspectives and a Short Scenario** continues at MCA, Chicago October and MAK, Vienna October. Forthcoming publication **Allbooks, An Anthology of writings**, Book Works, London this June.

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23 January - 9 April 2009

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