



**LIAM GILLICK**  
NEW YORK

Liam Gillick is the paradigmatic “difficult” artist in that his work requires effort merely to experience, let alone understand or judge. As the mouthful of a title suggests, his recent exhibition *Discussion Bench Platforms, A ‘Volvo Bar’ + Everything Good Goes* is no different [Casey Kaplan; February 18—March 27, 2010]. The show features Gillick’s brightly colored, cheerily minimalist architectural embellishments called *Discussion Bench Platforms*. It’s as if we’d entered the lobby of CB2 corporate headquarters. Yet, their title suggests that these objects are meant to catalyze social interaction, though it is unclear whether this function is actual or metaphorical. On the walls, a series of prints combine medieval woodcuts with bits of an unrelated dialogue between Frank and Alberto the bartender. Frank orders a beer, and seems confused about his identity and location—it turns out he somehow entered the bar at the moment of his birth. The text is excerpted from a “short scenario” written by Gillick, a confusing narrative that references the team-based—rather than assembly-line—production strategies Volvo adopted in the late 1960s. The automaker’s anti-Taylorist approach initially seemed to empower workers, but in the end caused even their after-work social lives to be colonized by corporate interests.

The story’s dreamy, timeless/placeless feeling is heightened by the peculiar illustrations of the medieval woodcuts, and the comparatively futuristic *Discussion Bench Platforms*. Gillick ties together the beginning and endpoints of modern Western sociality and productivity into a purgatorial “guy walks into the company bar” scenario through which we may loiter and drift. In the back room, a video projection and audio recording document the design of a 3-D model of the famous diorama set from Godard and Gorin’s *Tout Va Bien*, a film that shows the unfolding of a factory strike. In the film, the factory is shown in cross-section, which turns the whole drama into a human-scale ant farm and creates an architectural analog for a system of social control.

As is obvious, much of Gillick’s work exists in off-site, textual material. Gillick talks a lot: he gives long, dense lectures, writes theoretical texts, conducts historical and sociological research, and all of it cross-references all the rest in an intricate and intimidating web of which physical objects are only one part. Surprisingly, once we do our homework, the feeling of not quite grasping the work doesn’t decrease. How does someone so loquacious so effectively evade our understanding?

Art turns matters of fact into matters of form—it corrals pieces of the pragmatic world into the domain of aesthetics. Beyond aestheticizing the abstract ideas that are the product of high-level, theoretical, academic discourse in the manner of their conceptualist forebears, artists such as Gillick have managed to aestheticize discourse itself. Gillick’s verbal activity doesn’t explain the visual—it extends and complicates it. The strategic value of this technique becomes obvious the moment you dip your toe into Gillick’s universe. It is extremely difficult to follow the logic of complex, theoretical argumentation while at the same time holding this argumentation at a sufficient distance so as to contemplate it aesthetically. Your brain can’t handle both at once. So if the work —by which I mean Gillick’s heterogeneous set of activities as a whole—starts to falter aesthetically, it can emphasize its analytical side. If the validity of that rational analysis becomes dubious, it can re-aestheticize itself. Thus, any judgment of either aesthetic or truth value is endlessly deferred. Things always remain interesting while never being convincing—in either aesthetic or rational terms. A brilliant trick.

—Adam Thompson

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ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Liam Gillick, *Discussion Bench Platform Black*, 2010, painted aluminum, transparent Plexiglas, bench: 78.74 x 19.69 x 19.69 inches; platform: 2 x 118.11 x 78.74 x 118.11 inches, installed height: 78 inches, unique; *Discussion Bench Platform Red*, 2010, painted aluminum, transparent Plexiglas, two benches: 78.74 x 19.69 x 19.69 inches each; platform: 2 x 118.11 x 78.74 x 118.11 inches, installed height: 78 inches, unique (courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York; photo: Cary Whittier)