Liam Gillick

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO

Sean Keller

NO ONE CAN DENY Liam Gillick's ambition. Here is an artist who wants to take it all on: global capitalism, corporate identity, product design, institutional critique, modernism and its aftermath, Minimalism and *its* aftermath, literary conventions, the linearity of time itself. The forms of Gillick's engagement are equally diverse, including sculpture, installation, print, video, and curatorial projects, as well as prolific writing of criticism, manifestos, and fiction. All of this is guided by an unresolved combination of the Marxist desire to explain everything with a single system (centered on economics) and a post-Marxist realization that no system can ever achieve this goal. And so Gillick often emphasizes the gaps within systems, or what he has described as "the peculiar sense of disorder that accompanies any visit to an apparently well-ordered bureaucratic setup."

It is no surprise, then, that a "midcareer retrospective" of Gillick's work could not be just that. Instead, this rite of passage was reworked as "Three Perspectives and a Short Scenario," a sequence of three varied shows at the Kunsthalle Zürich (spring 2008), the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam (spring

2008), and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago this past fall and winter; and an event at the Kunstverein München (fall 2008). Each of the three "perspectives" featured an installation of black horizontally slatted screens and gray carpet; a block of vitrines that resembled converted Donald Judd sculptures, containing graphic-design work and books; a video summary of Gillick's work along with text from ongoing writing projects; and one or two posters. The screens, made of MDF and at once suggesting office partitions, library shelving, and IKEA furniture, were arranged to define loose subgalleries within each show. The "short scenario" in Munich was a performance titled *A "Volvo" Bar* (recently revisited as a series of prints at Casey Kaplan in New York), which took place on a gray carpet among a different group of screens.

Each of the "perspective" venues also included a unique piece of programming: in Zurich, reenactments of early works; in Rotterdam, a program of shows by other artists. In Chicago, this supplement took the form of a separate exhibition, "The One Hundred and Sixty-third Floor: Liam Gillick Curates the Collection." The title mockingly suggests a fictional level that would surpass the 162 floors of the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, thereby allowing Chicago to once again have the world's tallest building. For the exhibit, Gillick paired works from the museum's collection (arranged more or less alphabetically) with labels that each included a year from the museum's history (1967–2009, but not the year of the corresponding work itself), excerpts from the museum's internal records (again unrelated to the work), and, lastly, the actual object information for the work. The result was less institutional critique than curatorial dada, opening up an enjoyably speculative space between object and label, as well as an unsettling gap in intentionality. (For example, is the combination of "1974," "Propaganda.

The east is red. Life size super realism. Eight musical performances. A holiday playground. Theater, dance, puppets, mime and magic," and John Baldessari's 1987 *Three Eyes [with Gold Bug]* purposeful? Meaningful?)

In the main gallery, Gillick's own works were the semiotic equivalents of Apple products (which appear prominently in his 2008 video *Everything Good Goes*): Embedded within the sleek exteriors were remarkably intricate and far-reaching systems of meaning. Take, for example, one of the two posterlike prints that seemed to serve as icons for the exhibition (the only items hung on the walls, they were aligned with the entrance). What one saw was a square black field recalling an album cover (not incidentally, as we will see), within which rested a geometric pattern of squares and rhomboids, each given a distinct, slightly cool color. The pattern read as a set of rectangular volumes performing synchronized optical

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flips between concave and convex. Above these figures were four words in white lowercase sans serif: *deferral*, *detour*, *discussion*, and *documentary*. The overall effect was of a vaguely nostalgic institutional or corporate identity. As such, the work generated mood but not much immediate meaning.

The exhibition wall text and brochure provided clues to what lay behind the surface, noting that the graphic was a "reworking of a 1976 poster by Herbert Kapitzki (German, b. 1925) for the International Design Center [IDZ] in Berlin" and that Kapitzki was associated with

the famous Ulm School of Design, the most direct postwar German successor to the Bauhaus. Following this lead—likely only after one has left the exhibition—one stumbles upon an entire field of associations that are indispensable for a full understanding of the object and of Gillick's practice in general. Founded in 1968, the IDZ describes itself as "a communications platform connecting business, society and culture"—a latter-day *Werkbund* pursuing that particularly German reconciliation of commerce and culture through quality. Kapitzki's original poster (not reproduced anywhere in the show) features the same geometric construction in different colors, but a far more didactic text. Translated, it reads:

Design should optimize functions, make transparent, visually transport, make comprehensible, make manageable, represent aesthetically, make economically effective; not conceal, decorate, ornament, imitate, corrupt, level, plagiarize. Design not as seeming reality but as an integral component of objectifiable reality. Design between seeming and being.

In place of this manifesto of transparency, Gillick gives us only his four dithering *d*'s as watchwords for the exhibition. Here, as in much of Gillick's work, references to the forms and ideologies of modernism are simultaneously embedded, deflated, and concealed within an object that relies on visual abstraction and verbal opacity to frustrate access to the sources that underlie its meaning. The goal seems to be a dense, even mystified, iconology of modernist design requiring a hermeneutics of its own.

Given his obsession with institutional structures, Gillick has an oddly casual approach to the ways in which the sources and references behind his work are—or are not—communicated. In Chicago, for example, it was left to curator Dominic Molon to provide clues in the exhibition's supplemental material. Within such a highly theorized

practice, this gap suggests that Gillick may consider the specific references to be necessary only to his own productive process and that he intends reception to take place on a more ambiguous, even atmospheric, level. And yet he does not actively suppress the revelation of these references, so he might intend for them to trickle out via "discussions" such as this very review.

Perhaps the sparest example of this strategy is the percussive sound track that projected from a ceiling-mounted speaker toward one corner of the gallery. Its nearly uniform rhythm suggested a factory environment similar to that described by the text projected nearby, taken from two of the artist's ongoing writing projects, *Factories in the Snow*, 2006, and the unpublished *Construcción de Uno—Construction of One*. The museum's information sheet and a published interview with Gillick add far more specific references. We learn that the audio is meant to recall the drum track of the 1979 Joy Division song "She's Lost Control," creating a half joke about control and industrial production that resonates more deeply with the projected text. The Joy Division reference is further meant to evoke the album covers of Peter Saville, graphic designer for Factory Records, who was himself influenced by "the cool, disciplined 'New Typography' of [Jan] Tschichold," an important advocate of modernist typography and design in 1920s Germany. This is, then, the audio equivalent of the geometric poster: the apparently meaningless *thump, thump, thump, thump* standing in for a very specific line of associations that carries us deep into Gillick's obsession with modernism and its legacy.

Above this all hovered the show's single grand gesture: the glowing, candy-colored ceiling grid that Gillick created by simply replacing the museum's standard white light covers with a random pattern of brightly tinted transparent ones. The result was a large-scale version of

the gridded "discussion platforms" that are Gillick's best-known works—a fittingly retrospective gesture linked to the poster's suggestion that the entire gallery should, or could, become a Socratic space. Yet while the architectural impact of the intervention was strong—revealing the conduit and fluorescent fixtures usually hidden above the ceiling while focusing attention on this plane and its rationalizing grid—the effect was, again, not directly critical but ambiguous. The gallery's white box was not so much challenged as repurposed.

But to what end? Gillick's work should be distinguished from the more overtly participatory practices of an artist such as Rirkrit Tiravanija. The fact that Gillick creates works called discussion platforms does not mean he intends anything so direct as for them to be places to talk. Indeed, his slick aesthetic suggests the opposite: His works function more as chilly icons of unrealized interaction than as vehicles for interaction itself. Writing about the ambitions of more utopian work, Gillick has said, "My interest is far more grounded and potentially disappointing than this. And could be described as an ongoing investigation of how the middle ground of social and economic activity leaves traces in our current environment." "Three Perspectives and a Short Scenario" effectively captured this interest in the physical traces of graphics, objects, and environments. Generated by complex reflections on both grand themes and specific precedents, the real strength—the truth, even—of Gillick's practice lies in his capacity to produce things and places that mirror and distort the opacity of contemporary markets, economic and artistic alike. Which is to say that Gillick's practice intentionally remains representational, not operative. Or, as the reductive sound track suggests, no one here has lost control. □

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Opposite page, from left: View of Liam Gillick, "Three Perspectives and a Short Scenario," 2009, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Photo: Nathan Keay. John Baldessari, *Three Eyes (with Gold Bug)*, 1987, black-and-white photographs, oil tint, vinyl paint, 91 x 80". From "The One Hundred and Sixty-third Floor: Liam Gillick Curates the Collection," Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2009. This page, from left: View of Liam Gillick, "Three Perspectives and a Short Scenario," 2009, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Details of vitrines. Photos: Nathan Keay. Liam Gillick, untitled, 2009, digital print on paper, 11¾ x 11¾".

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