

Liam Gillick, Pt III

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*Suspended Agreement* (2010), painted aluminium, transparent colored plexiglass, 5 x 300 x 200 cm. Installation view at Taro Nasu, Tokyo, 2013. Courtesy Liam Gillick and Taro Nasu, Tokyo.

**ART iT:** The design of the door downstairs, with a frame filled in by vertical slats, is similar to the sliding doors made of wood that are often used in Japanese restaurants. Was that part of the inspiration for the work?

**LG:** Not consciously, but in fact it's possible there is a connection. I am interested in non-fundamental, extra architecture, the thing that is a canopy or a screen or a door that is not completely closed but only symbolically closes or alters the space. That interests me regardless of Japan. For instance, I did something similar in the German Pavilion at the Venice

Biennale in 2009. In the entryway to the pavilion I placed these blinds made of vinyl, which are usually meant to stop flies from entering, to create a zone without completely closing it. It's about seeing people through something, creating spaces of semi-autonomy rather than a space that is completely autonomous.

I generally work in a really material way. I have an idea and sit down with technical paper or at the computer and start to make models of the architecture, and then I start to work within the actual architecture. It's a really specific way of working.

**ART iT:** In your writing you've been critical of the idea of transparency, and yet in your works you often use transparent materials.

**LG:** In my writing I refer to transparency more in a political sense. Transparency is the physical manifestation of the democratic lack in neoliberalism. We are told the banking system or financial regulation has to become more transparent in order to liberalize it somehow. Right now I think all these things are changing and shifting a bit, but in the past I was worried about the idea of art that suggested an equal exchange. I want things to be grayer than that, even as my work is becoming less gray and more precise. There's a more precise battle between abstraction and the texts taking place now. But that doesn't mean I am more interested in art as a set of certainties.



**Both:** *How are you going to behave? A kitchen cat speaks* (2009), fir wood, lights, fixtures, hardware, colored vinyl door flaps, animatronic cat, soundtrack, text, dimensions variable. Installation view in the German Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale, 2009. Courtesy Liam Gillick and Casey Kaplan, New York.

**ART iT:** For me there's a duality to your work. On the one hand it appears to be quite benign, on the other it appropriates the logic of the barrier, the kind of device that is built into the everyday environment as a means to restrict behavior.

**LG:** Absolutely. I've been looking at Dan Graham's work a lot more because I have so much in common with his interests and I have to make some decisions about that relationship. In fact, what I want to do is start talking to him. I saw a very good improvised exhibition of his work in Porto recently.

I think with both of us there's this feeling that you should address questions in the culture that are not exactly ambient but are at least evocative rather than didactic. There's also the problem of the viewer, the human relationship to the work, which I think Graham has always dealt with very clearly: the viewer has a very clear perspective, but it's also fucked by the reflection of the materials and so on.

I'm wondering whether or how to deal with this question of the human relationship to art. I'm thinking about Philippe Parreno's exhibition in Paris, which is literally a journey through a series of different experiences. With this exhibition, Philippe has clarified something very strong about his work, and it means I have to rethink my work as well.

I work in relation to other artists, not just in relation to a space or a city or so on. Philippe and I have started making a new film together using CGI animation and will introduce a number of people we have worked with in the past. We are working initially with an animator who works on big budget films in French cinema to create visualizations of a series of settings or *mise-en-scènes*. Two of the early visualizations are inspired by the first night I ever spent in Tokyo, but now reworked on an extreme level so that the city looks like a cross between Venezuela and Japan – urban highways intersecting all over the place and half-finished buildings with people living in them. As a project, it sounds basic, but it's going to start to produce something.

**ART iT:** Cerith Wyn Evans was also deeply affected by his first trip here. He said of Tokyo, "the matrix of the codes that the city was performing was devastating."

**LG:** I can imagine. You can see it in his work. It sounds like I'm saying this to be polite because I'm a visitor, but that's not really the case for me. It's interesting to work in a place that was completely remade within the lifetime of my father. Yesterday I spent an hour walking around the area near the Okura, and I realized that every single thing I saw had been built since 1950, or even 1970. That has very strong implications. It's like somebody took lots of human energy, condensed it and stored it in this physical production. There's nothing magical about this process, but in a certain way, it's really powerful.

The areas I'm interested in have always been middle-area questions around renovation, compromise, collectivity without communism, organization of production that involves individual work and team work, and when you come here, even in the downtown area, you see this all locked into physical form. So that's what I mean: I'm only affected by being here in relation to other objects. It's not about Japanese culture; it's to do with the physical manifestation of human energy into condensed physical object form.



*Raised Laguna Discussion Platform (Job #1073) (2013), painted steel, 304.8 x 406.4 x 1096.6 cm. Installation view at The Contemporary Austin. Photo David Mead, courtesy Liam Gillick and Casey Kaplan, New York.*

**ART iT:** There are certain repeating forms that appear in your works. How do you understand this idea of repeating form when each work is also given a specific title at the same time?

**LG:** I don't have a good answer. Sometimes there are specific reasons why I use certain forms, and they have a particular function, but they're not based on any system thinking. Some of it is about asserting a type of expression or set of forms that needs to be restated and refined in order for it to communicate.

One of the works here, [*Suspended Agreement* (2010)], is an advanced version of earlier versions of my "Discussion Platforms." The first versions were made alone and very quickly and just hung from the ceiling. I couldn't have made this advanced version in the beginning. There's nothing fundamentally different – it's a similar production technique – but there's something about it that satisfies me in terms of what it's doing now. It occupies a type of physical space that I felt needed to be occupied.

And it does so using a restricted number of forms: the "T" shape and the "L" shape. These are my shapes – aluminum extrusions. For example, in working with three-dimensional digital software, whenever you open a new file the program automatically gives you a sphere, a square and a triangle as the fundamental forms to work with. I have always liked working with the non-fundamental forms, and the "T" and the "L" are the first variants of the fundamental form of the square. You remove two sides, or you put two lines in relation to each other, but they don't have the supposed "truth" of the cube. They are essentially the shapes that are used to make windows or storefronts, temporary construction, office spaces. And it's the same material, too. It's hard to do certain things with these shapes, which are what you could call secondary forms, because they're not closed like a square. But you can make them sit without fixing them together: there are only four screws holding the whole piece together here. These works are always meant to go in relation to something. They're not really meant for a white room. The "T" and "L" are relational rather than fundamental.

So that's where these things come from, and I'm still satisfied with them to a point, but I'm taking some time now to examine other things, like the idea of the artist, the idea of contemporary art and also collaborative thinking, while at the same time trying to keep alive something that's to do with my version of abstraction, which is a very material, relativistic, parallel way of doing things.

**ART iT:** You use abstraction both as something that is non-representational and as something that has been extrapolated from a complex set of information.

**LG:** Exactly. In the new book I am publishing of my Columbia University Bampton Lectures there are two early chapters, one on abstraction and one on parallelism. In a way they say the same thing, but one's referring to where you are placed in relation to ideas and the other is about where things are placed in relation to other things. I started using the word abstraction at some point in relation to physical work because I wanted to remove some of the narrative and storytelling aspect from the work, or the feeling that it has a designated use. I started using it partly to be annoying or irritating. But it's true that I often use the same term, or a similar process, to talk about two completely different things.

**ART iT:** The "Discussion Platforms" are suspended from the ceiling, which to me suggests an inverted or upturned space of discussion. Is this what you had in mind for the concept?

**LG:** Absolutely. For me it creates a sort of pressure rather than liberation. I always have the feeling there's something above me, a discomfiting presence. The term "platform" implies that you should be standing above it, not underneath. It was possibly influenced by reading *The Tin Drum* when I was young. In the book there's the part where the boy sits beneath the seats during a Nazi rally and discovers a space of potential away from the corruption of ideology taking place above. It becomes for him a protected space that acts as a screen. If you've ever sat beneath a stadium, there's something very profound about that feeling of being underneath, hidden, and free while getting glimpses of the action and hearing the mood of the crowd.



**Top:** *Discussion Island Rest Rig* (1997/2000), installation view at Taro Nasu, Tokyo. Photo Keizo Kioku, © Liam Gillick, courtesy Esther Schipper, Berlin, and Taro Nasu, Tokyo. **Bottom:** *Ibuka! (Part 1)* (1995), installation, mixed media: table, copper plates, sketch, sound (Carl Stallings), book extracts, dimensions variable. Photo © Marc Domage, courtesy Air de Paris, Paris.

**ART iT:** Ideology is of course itself a "platform" upon which discussion takes place, so being beneath the platform suggests a space where you can see the structure of ideology and how it

supports what is going on above.

**LG:** Yes. That was the original idea. It designates a space within which you can think about the idea of these things. You don't have to actually do it. It's not an instruction to behave a certain way or actually do something. That's the basis of my frustration about how people have tried to write about participatory art or relational aesthetics, which misses the aesthetics part and only focuses on the relational part, for example, or misunderstands the differences in certain participatory practices and assumes that there is a designated action that is even across time, space and ideology.

**ART iT:** Is it accurate to say, then, that your works emerge from a kind of corporate aesthetic, or an aesthetic of control, as both a residue and a commentary on that aesthetic?

**LG:** In a way, although I was also thinking about renovation, and how spaces of culture are designed or thought about. The Mori Tower hosts a museum but also has offices, and in fact many museums today are indistinguishable from office buildings. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has the same flowers, the same front desk, the same women in black clothes, the same atrium as a big corporation. I wasn't thinking about corporate things as such, I was thinking more about how they have merged.

**ART iT:** But the architecture of control is increasingly integrated into every facet of our lives now through things like proprietary software connecting our smart phones to our computers, determining how we communicate, how we relate to our photos and music and so on, and it seems that with each upgraded device it gets harder and harder to work around that proprietary structure.

**LG:** There are probably workarounds, but you need to work harder to do it. With my work, when we're talking about these physical things and not the conceptual or written aspects, it is quite sinister in a sense. The work seems to be attractive but of course the door that evokes a traditional sliding door is still made out of painted aluminum, and the handrail [*Restricted Roundrail (White)* (2012)] is placed too low, so it might have some other function. In the apparently formalistic arrangement of these things, I always think of them as though they have some kind of electrical function, as though they're used to disperse heat: they are the disguised element of something that has an environmental or channeling function. So I think that there is a way to talk about my work in relation to physical things and to look at what you're looking at and say, "Here is a relationship between this specific thing and other things in the world." But most people don't do it because they don't want to, or they think it's maybe not relevant, but it absolutely is relevant.

So I agree with you, and that's why I spent so much time today sitting and looking at disguised forms of control. And of course Japan's particularly good at this, so in these corporate environments you don't really see any control system when in fact there are all these subtle things taking place within the built structure of the place. I think most tourists would single out the man with the white gloves who tells people politely to avoid the hole in the street. But that's not control. That's service, or a legacy of class and identity, but not really control. What's more interesting is how the semi-public space is arranged around the base of a building so that it is completely abstracted away from a sense of control, but still affects the way people behave much more than the guy with white gloves pointing at things, who's just doing a job.



*Restricted Roundrail (White)* (2012), powder-coated aluminium, 5 x 400 x 5 cm. Installation view at Taro Nasu, Tokyo, 2013. Courtesy Liam Gillick and Taro Nasu, Tokyo.



**ART iT:** With the door piece, the other immediate association is the prison cell.

**LG:** Absolutely. So at the moment I have to decide how to proceed. Now what do I do? I would say that these works are getting to the point where this is just about the way they should be. They are about as big as they should be for this kind of space to make it work, and in this exhibition we are seeing an advanced expression of this kind of work. For my exhibition in Berlin in the spring I will strip away all the surface and color from everything, just to see what happens. It's part of the same process I described to you before. Take the surface off; make the artist a subject; collaborate with people who were important for you when you were young. Play with time in a new way. It's a process of taking apart a lot of things and laying out the different elements to see what you have.

**ART iT:** "Horseness is the whatness of all horse." What does that mean to you now?

**LG:** I like it because it's an expression of Irish genius – the quote comes from *Ulysses* by James Joyce. And it's a very modernist expression, but of course it has deep philosophical roots: the quality of a horse is its horseness. I like it because it seems to answer a particular question through a quasi-philosophical statement, but it evokes images in your head that are somewhat stupid or strange. It keeps bringing you back to the horse. The line comes from Joyce, but for me it also connects to Tarkovsky, and the part in the film *Solaris* where the protagonist is bidding goodbye to earth, because he has to go on this long journey, and there's a few points where you see a horse, and that horse has the quality of a horse – it has this fundamental quality of horseness. Of course the planet of Solaris is actually a kind of sentient memory machine which plays with the reiteration and revitalization of memory, and the horse is a thing, an essence and an entity. So in a way the phrase is a great mockery of early modernist thinking and its puritanical focus on material things, because it's about a horse and beyond a horse at the same time.

It's really weird that you mention this work, because as I was walking here I thought I heard horses, and then I realized of course there are no horses in Tokyo, and then I had this idea of riding to the gallery on a horse, and leaving it tied up outside or something like that. So, there you go. It's that combination. It's a great statement. The thing is the thing, or the thingness of the thing, but it's taking an abstraction and turning it into a physical, contradictory image. It's a stupid thing to say and it's brilliant at the same time. I think I need a bit of that every day.