

GREGOR STEMMRICH

Liam Gillick— “A Debate about Debate”

There is hardly any word Liam Gillick uses more often when explaining his art, or describing the status of certain elements in it, than the word “parallel”—by which he means parallel constructions, parallel individuals, parallel historians, parallel excursions, and activities parallel to the making of art. Although the surface meaning of the word is apparent in each of these cases, it is not clear what the word signifies for Gillick’s artistic practice as a whole. It may help to take a look at where the word was first introduced into the art discourse and where it has already served to define a new kind of artistic practice. Cézanne characterized his painting as an activity that runs “parallel to nature.” He thereby eroded the entire complex of ideas traditionally subsumed under the concept of “imitating nature.” No longer did artistic activity seek to imitate nature but rather to acquire a

detachment that made it possible to analyze art on its own level. But what about activities that run parallel to art? Is the resulting mental detachment designed to analyze art on its own level, or is a given situation—social, historical, economic, etc.—being analyzed on its own level? Does a parallel activity or construction of this kind aspire to a level outside of the given situation? And, inasmuch as it is related through leaps of time and space to the given situation, would it not merely reveal the potential inherent in the situation? An odd sort of circularity is entailed in parallelism, a progressive layering and feedback among areas ordinarily held to be separate and distinct.

Gillick’s activities as a “journalist,” an “architect,” a “designer,” etc. in parallel with art, his “What If?” scenarios and the leaps of time and space in his writings (his novel *Erasmus Is Late*, the musical *Ibuka!* which is based on it, and the novel *Big Conference Centre*) are different ways of setting this circularity in motion. In *Erasmus Is Late* and *Ibuka!* (1995), Gillick brings various people together, some from the twentieth, others from the outgoing eighteenth century, for a free-thinker’s dinner in London at the home of

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Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's older brother. The dinner takes place in a time slip between 1810 and 1997—between the moment in history just before “the mob are re-defined as the workers”¹⁾ and the moment in history that lies immediately ahead of the piece written in 1995. This generates a hypothetical parallelism and uniform directionality, in which the situation of 1810 represents “the roots of our current situation.” But the word “roots” does not point towards a beginning, resonant with unsuspected potential, but rather towards an opportunity missed in 1810, which flickers into life again in 1995 like phantom pain. “From tomorrow, Marxism is an inevitability and the power will move away from free-thinking diners and into the rightful hands of working people.”²⁾ It is the last chance “to encourage a particular form of pre-Marxist republican revolution,” a revolution of freethinkers, based on the creation of indirect forces whose origins would have been debate as a free exchange of opinion—a debate about debate, its hidden potential, and the shared use of this potential. Gillick describes the situation in his foreword to *Ibuka!*: “The guests have not come to terms with the potential of that night's events. Yet the rest of us have witnessed something quite special. A debate about debate. An attempt to reframe the potential across time.” For the artist, the “debate about debate” is a concept that enables him to deal with both the historical premises of the present situation and the potential inherent in this situation. This debate is based on self-detachment, while also clearly demonstrating its precarious status as mere debate. The audience, therefore, is made aware of both the conditions of its own evolution as well as what could evolve out of the debate. It has no foundation in shared basic convictions. The debate about debate may be intended to create premises for the prospect of shared action but it is most unlikely that it will ever succeed. The people involved are compelled to rely on themselves and take great pains psychologically to disavow their uneasy feelings about the situation. Instead of “a debate about debate,” the scenario is corrupted and yet—or even therefore—this debate is represented through its effects.

Gillick evokes the scenario of a free-thinkers dinner not as a utopian ideal but in order to discredit

this ideal and thus cast a critical light on the current situation. The “conditions that provoked the rise of the soft left and late Twentieth century democratic market economies” presuppose the failure of free-thinking ideals but they also underlie the interiorization, corruption and displacement of these ideals.³⁾ In historical, dramatic terms, the failure never really took place but is rather to be seen as a potential that remained unexploited. By dramatizing this non-exploitation and constructing it as a historical gap, Gillick encourages the inclination of viewers to fill the gap themselves—with what they know from their own historical situations and with what they glean from the twentieth century diners, from various accessories (a walkman for instance), and from the stage set as a whole.

In this way, Gillick constructs and reconstructs institutional gaps and empty spaces, that is, institutions whose mode of functioning is extremely obscure and which obviously do not live up to their historical claims nor to their political significance. The free-thinkers dinner and also the *Big Conference Centre* are institutions of this kind, but it takes the narrative strategy of “dramatic absence” for the reader to apprehend this underlying thought. In *Erasmus Is Late and Ibuka!*, the central character, the dinner host, never comes home; *Big Conference Centre* begins with the suicide of someone who jumps out of the twenty-second story of a building; and the film *McNamara* revolves around the absence of President John F. Kennedy. However, absence as such is not underscored since everybody acts as if nobody were absent. To a certain extent, the dinner guests have the chance to communicate with Erasmus, who is wandering around London in a haze of opium; and the dead character in *Big Conference Centre* makes an appearance in the ensuing narrative only in the sense of a chance confluence of events. Absence itself is not of dramatic significance; only through the realization that it has no dramatic effect per se does it in fact become dramatic. Our attention is thus drawn to the conditions that makes this possible.

The institutions represent an indirect claim to power but no one knows where it comes from, nor does one have the impression that the people involved in them are of any use to the furtherance of

this power. The central characters are not, or only rarely, in the building where the debate is supposed to take place. Instead they are obviously somewhere else—in the streets and malls of London, in networks of secret tunnels under Parliament, on the edges or outside the city limits, in the country near a national park. The “debate about debate” is subject to a centrifugal force that prevents it from ever really taking place. Attention is therefore directed towards a region between official and unofficial places, between center and periphery, between public representation and a strategy of private retreat, where the debate falls apart and where its potential is inscrutably reorganized for other purposes. From the outside it looks like “business as usual” and behind this facade it becomes both arcana and a resonance for all kinds of coincidences and chance events, whose mutual relationship remains hypothetical.

Gillick does not focus on the center of power but rather on that which is or could be of vital significance to this center. On the surface these are structures and processes designed to secure the concentration of power in the center, as in Gillick’s fiction of cooperation between Robert McNamara, former secretary of defense under John F. Kennedy, and Herman Kahn of the Rand Corporation. At the same time the superficiality of this conscious intent crumbles before our very eyes, revealing the inherent dynamics and self-referentiality of the processes officially designed to confirm this declared intent. A middle- and background thus emerge, in which all things and projects have a virtual status. The center of power may be capable of defining conditions but the middle- and background that relate to it form a permanent “what if” scenario, a setting for thoughts about the near future, thoughts that may be of importance to the center but are not centered themselves.

Gillick not only explores this setting in his novels, he also develops strategies—both following and in preparation for the texts he writes—to represent specific aspects of this setting in aesthetic terms. These are not illustrations; they are aesthetic structures or interventions, whose subject matter relates to the mental processes, which in turn make them virtually possible and which are, on the other hand, treated in

a narrative context in the novels. Recipients of these structures and interventions can therefore read themselves as virtual characters in the novel or, conversely, the fictional characters can read themselves as virtual recipients. They find themselves compelled to establish an idiosyncratic relationship to the structures and interventions in order to exploit their potential.

Gillick’s *Discussion Islands*—the choice of forms, materials, combinations, and their relationship to architectural elements—suggest an affinity with minimal art, which instantly proves deceptive. His assemblages are more fragile, more convoluted, less geared towards “forms that create a strong gestalt impression” (Robert Morris) or an enduring impact through serial repetition, which gives viewers an experience of presence and place. Instead they tend to create a responsiveness to the subtle possibilities inherent in the structure of the artifact.

As a rule the titles are already obviously linked to events in the novels, as in *Big Conference Platform Platform* (1998). The closer characterization of additional statements usually indicates a mental disposition in the treatment of possibilities: “A discussion platform that might be seen as acting as a relatively neutralized control structure in relation to other platforms while also designating a space where there is an open frame for free thought.”⁴⁾ Significantly, Gillick identifies the “control structure” with a “space where there is an open frame for free thought.” Free thought is thus inseparably linked with thinking about planning, strategy, spheres of influence, and control—be it to exercise control or to protect oneself from it. His platforms create and structure spaces that stimulate thought, including thinking about this form of thinking.

Although the work is at a great remove from minimal art, a comparison is fruitful because what often appears to be just a slight deviation from minimalist vocabulary serves, in fact, to mark the difference in artistic approach all the more incisively. In 1970 Carl Andre declared, “I have a scientific view of the future but a poetic view of the present. This is not true of a revolutionary: a revolutionary has a scientific view of the present and a poetic view of the future... We have to be scientists of the present if we’re to be the poets

and revolutionaries of the future. I would like to think my work is in the tradition of the Russian revolutionary artists Tatlin and Rodchenko.⁵⁾ But (in *Erasmus Is Late* and *Ibuka!*) Gillick intentionally refers to a historical moment just “before the mob [were] re-defined as the workers.” The reference to a historical past serves to clear up the current parameters of discourse and experience. Neither the poetic intimacy of the present nor a future that can be reached with scientific methods by way of revolution still possess any utopian potential. Thinking about the present and future is thus subject to different, post-utopian premises. The revolutionary energy that takes up the cause with scientific sobriety has given way to a “big conference centre,” to flexible thinking about potentiality and strategy, about possibilities of planning and control; and the poetic intimacy of experience has given way to an idiosyncratic treatment of the forms of design and display, which might stimulate, condition, and aesthetically represent this thinking. Attention is now focused neither on the present nor on the distant future but rather on the “near” future with its direct though diffuse link to the present. Gillick’s platforms—Plexiglas panels in aluminum frames—do not obey gravity and lie on the floor like Andre’s carpets of metal panels that viewers can step on. No, they are suspended from the ceiling, parallel to the floor so that viewers must tilt their heads to look up at the platforms and the way they are mounted. In his boxed and wall constructions, he uses materials like Plexiglas, plywood, pine, and aluminum as Donald Judd did before him, but without giving viewers the feeling of knowing where they stand. Instead they are awash with feelings of enigmatic and fluttering indeterminacy. With its formal rigidity and industrial design, Judd’s art interpreted the rhetoric of “power,” “specificity,” and “wholeness” against a background of values inextricably intertwined with the arrogance of pre-Vietnam America. That does not mean that Judd’s art can be identified with these values or depends on their continuing existence but it does help to understand that Gillick avoids evoking a background of such values and instead evokes the continuing existence of the undercurrents of these values—their obscure institutional framework—in his installations, novels, and



LIAM GILLICK, *DISCUSSION ISLAND RESIGNATION PLATFORM*, 1997, anodized aluminum and Plexiglas, cables, fittings, *Documenta X*, Kassel / *DISKUSSIONSINSEL – RESIGNATIONS-PLATTFORM*, eloxiertes Aluminium und Plexiglas, Kabel, Montagezubehör.

films. In this way he transforms the “container contained” concept of minimal art into a “debate-about-debate” concept, an idiosyncratic analysis of the debate on its own level, which refers both to its historical premises and, as a “what if?” scenario, to its near future.

Instead of imagining the “debate about debate” illustratively as ordinary discourse, as a rhetorically committed exchange of arguments with the goal of persuading or convincing others, Gillick represents this debate aesthetically in its mere potentiality and its effects which are inconceivable without their much ramified and inscrutable framework. Representation of this kind seems to be based on a concept of the historical resonance of concepts.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

1) Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from Liam Gillick, *Ibuka!*, edited by Nicolaus Schafhausen, Künstlerhaus Stuttgart 1995, p. 4.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

3) Cf.: Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973).

4) Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhausen, eds., *Liam Gillick* (Cologne: Oktagon, 2000), p. 82.

5) Willoughby Sharp, “Carl Andre,” in: *Avalanche* no. 1, autumn 1970, pp. 18–27.

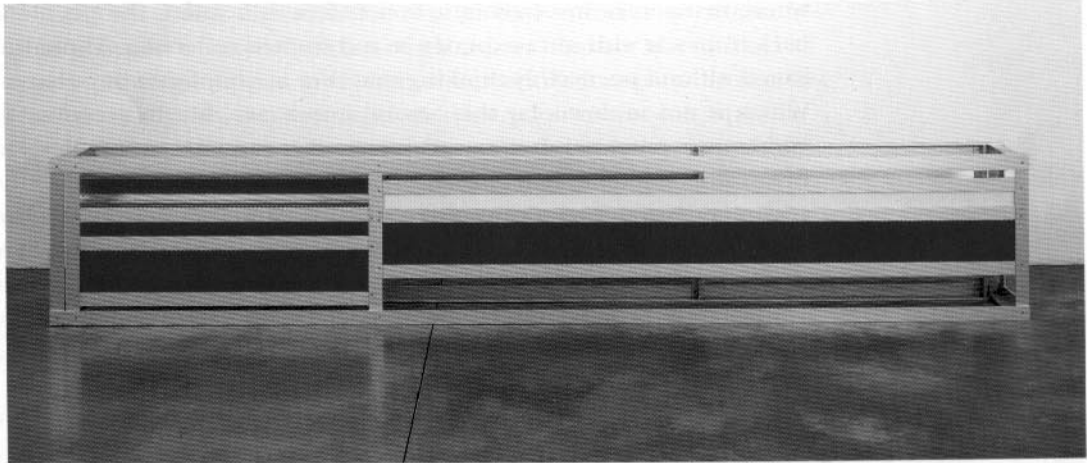
Literally No Place An Introduction

Reframed and reworked around a number of false starts and three short stories. *Literally No Place* will be a book that attempts to address the revised aesthetics that accompany certain types of softly communicated nebulous ethical shifts and exercises of conscience that have recently left their traces around us. Re-organized socio-economic structures have sought out new homes for their mutable transfers of meaning. In doing so they have created new visualizations of activity. In this book there will be three stories which develop situations that could be described as significant and marginal simultaneously. Three moments that carefully position and then unpack specific micro-environments where the seeds of recent socio-economic revisions and reassessments could have found germination points. Three locations in a series of scenarios that were initially considered to be starting points for radio plays. Some things to be heard, not read or seen. These are some notes towards how to begin with the focus stalled and turned backwards to an antecedent for a moment.

Stuck in a commune. It was then that I turned in the ravine and climbed to the top of the bank and saw the place again. I had been gone for three days and had walked about a hundred kilometers. I felt fine. The stiffness and soreness had been walked off and my legs had been growing strong and my step was light and I could feel the ball of each foot pushing the earth down from me as I walked. *Walden 2* by B.F. Skinner is a clunkily written vision. It is one of those superficially problematic texts that have formed a subliminal model for certain socio-economic developments and manifestations of branded activity that circulate, half-digested, around post-corporate and post-industrial environments. The idea could be re-framed as a beach towel, with the last sentence of the book printed or woven in: MYSTEPWASLIGHTANDICOULDFEELTHEBALLOFEACHFOOTPUSHINGTHESANDDOWNFROMMEASIWALKED

The idea of a commune, or a functional campus-style workplace that can be described as a semi-autonomous self-sufficient place; isolation towards the distribution of ideas. A book and a text that could only be produced in an immediate post-war environment, an American environment that was on the verge of excessive sentimentality in place of a particular memory for socialist or Marxist potential and change. The head of the American Communist party died in the year 2000, maybe waiting for a

LIAM GILLICK, EXPANSION SCREEN, 1999,
 anodized aluminum, Plexiglas, 24 x 144 x 12" /
 RAUMSCHIRM, eloxiertes Aluminium, Plexiglas,
 61 x 366 x 30,5 cm.



round number before giving up. He had sent a letter of complaint to Gorbachev during the late changes in the Soviet Union. Never repenting from a particularly perverse form of Stalinism, taking his style-book, even to the end, from a dour fifties model, all fedoras and homburgs and large, boxy, union built cars. *Walden 2* is a book that is somehow divorced from that ossified ideological lumpiness. A book produced in the gap between the Second World War and the first Cold War.

The projection of a place, a sketching of location, some idea of a commune, a functional rationalist commune that can really work and be productive through its focus upon the production, not just of better "things" but better "relationships." Prescient in its gloss over what should be produced. Vague in its description of relationships between the site and nature of production and everyone else. A place that is not really sub-cultural or communistic in tone but something more complicated than that. "My step was light and I could feel the ball of each foot pushing the earth down from me as I walked." It's the moment of re-engagement with the land; it's the moment when the main character expresses some belief in the world of the commune through its ability to make him feel the earth again. In touch for the first time, a Californian sense of touch, feeling the sand, not the sand of Omaha Beach but of a burgeoning desert place of Neutra Houses and exiled psychiatrists waiting for patients. *Walden 2* is a place where the trays are better designed than they were before the global conflict swept some histories away, where people are free because they cannot really communicate with the outside world, where they are free because they are stuck. *Walden 2* is a place where art is ten steps behind design, where focus on classical music is a reflection of the real values of the author, and a nice quasi-communistic touch. Any play with the idea of *Walden 2* is kind of complicated. It is no accident that the working model of the new technology companies of the late-twentieth century bore some relation to the legacy of *Walden*. Dusty location, flat organization and the residual potential of shady finances veiled behind initially content-free exchange and the rhetoric of functional utopia.

In *Walden 2* a group of outsiders join together to visit a new community and they are absolutely an American group of post-war people. They are from that moment

where many were involved in action before education, the people who are coming back from war with ultra-experience and stunted reflection. Those who have been engaged without necessarily thinking that they are implicated in what might come next. Which is not to downplay their moral imperative, but to accentuate their desire for Waldenistic potential. It is an acceptance that can only cut in after some serious skepticism and middleweight questioning. A form of utopia necessarily de-ideologized and experiential. The seriousness of their war-time actions reflects back on them only once they have returned home. A heart grabbed by a freezing hand every time it snows, reminders of huddling alone in the mountains of Italy, waiting to move forward. *Walden 2* can be transferred in time. The groups of people joining together have a functional relationship; they have a research necessity. They have a need to come and somehow project a place where they can be controlled and free simultaneously. Where their sense of ethics and sense of conscience can be collectivized, where it can be pulled together. A place that can be communal without being communist. A nostalgia point, but one that functions in a pioneer framework. The young pioneers of the Soviet model undercut by the legacy of the old (real) pioneers of the American model and the projecting towards technological pioneers of our recent past. One that provides all the potential of post-conflict reconfiguration, both literal and social.

A model for living and working, a model of appropriation; of a certain form of language. A desire for a certain lifestyle and a certain creativity without the attendant problems of control or prediction or planning. A speculative situation, where speculation alone replaces other collective action. Speculation as collectivism. You have it in *Walden 2* from 1948 as a kind of unwitting projection. It only functions as a fully formed ideal at the point of the Internet boom of the mid-nineties.

In *Walden 2* projection exists as a non-planned idea, as something that can only happen as a result of a collective desire and search for content-free research without revolution and as a result of a clumsily overwritten set of ethical revisions and shifts. This connection between the idea of a communal place that is based on desire within a rupture away from a fully planned communistic system has a fluid connection to a contemporary environment. It is a model of collectivism that challenged the Soviet model; it is a model that relied upon the presence of other models within a pluralistic, post-war American federal system. Not Federal central government, but the over-identification with a collection of semi-autonomous states and therefore semi-autonomous states of mind and self-images. "Where are you from?" replacing "Where are we going?" It's a connection that permits exposure to shifts of strategy towards the appropriation of apparently better or notionally conscience-based and ethically driven idea structures in the language of the consultant and the design detail. The use of a global-computer network that was never envisaged as a way to generate income looping round a story of a place that could never possibly be self-sufficient. The appropriation of an ethically derived language within a fractured sense of progress combined with a strange localist neo-conservative nostalgia. It is a situation that leads to ashrams and Microsoft; neo-conservatism and casual Fridays.

For the small group of people living in *Walden 2* their world appears initially as a description of rationalist heaven, a perfect place, an organized place, a place that shows how things can be. The way they live through the conditions described in the book is connected to the proliferation of soft analysis; the excess of context that surrounds

our contemporary decision-making; the escalation of attempts to predict in a situation where prediction has come loose from the idea of planning. Looking ahead has become a form of second-guessing wrapped in analysis, which really does plan the future but always claims to be reactive to the desires of the desired consumer. A situation where projection has begun to shimmer. *Literally No Place* will play with this completely revised sense of the relationship between the individual and place; the individual and the nature of production; and most crucially the function and use of creative thought as a fetish rather than a tool towards a paradigm shift in the relations between people and production, time-off and time running out.

LIAM GILLICK, "Literally No Place," exhibition view, Air de Paris, Paris, 2000 / Blick in die Ausstellung.



Thought Experiments

PETER WOLLEN

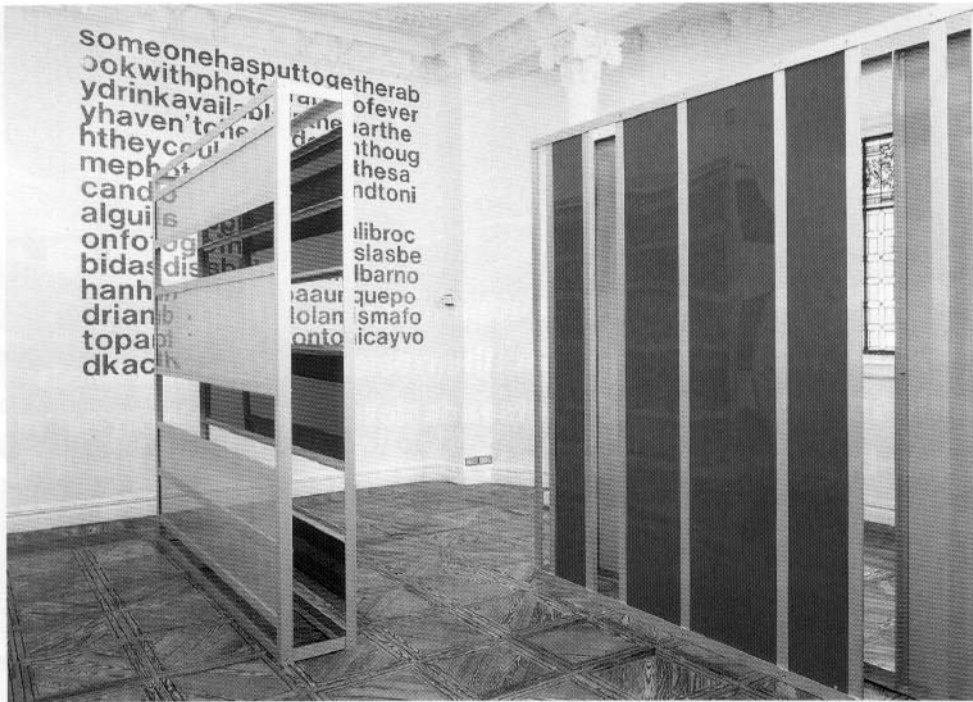
Liam Gillick loves to write. His exhibitions are accompanied by publications in book or booklet form, works which bear an oblique relationship to his art, a relationship that is often quite difficult to decipher. These complicated writings, which I found fascinating, are constructed around a cast of real historical characters whom Gillick has placed in imaginary situations, scenarios in which each individual character retains only a tenuous relationship to his or her actual historical self. Sometimes the characters are fairly well-known figures such as Harriet Martineau, the nineteenth-century writer, feminist, anti-slavery campaigner and free-trader, or Robert McNamara, United States Secretary for Defense during the Kennedy years, or J. K. Galbraith, another Kennedy appointee, or Herman Kahn, defense analyst for the Rand Corporation (and subsequently the Hudson Institute) whose vision of the Domsday Machine and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) was satirized in Stanley Kubrick's futuristic film, *Dr. Strangelove*.

Often, on the other hand, they are the close relatives of famous people, family members, as with Erasmus Alvey Darwin (the elder brother of Charles

Darwin, author of *The Origin of Species*) or Elsie McLuhan (mother of Marshall McLuhan, himself a speculative thinker) or Murry Wilson (father of the musician Brian Wilson, one of The Beach Boys). Or, like Masaru Ibuka, co-founder of the Sony company with Akio Morita, they might be the less well-known partner of a highly regarded global celebrity. These writings draw, to a considerable extent, on the actual lives and accomplishments of these real characters but also distort and fictionalize them. Thus Erasmus Alvey Darwin (known as Erasmus III) is depicted as an opium addict, although there is no evidence for this that I could find. His revered grandfather and namesake, Dr. Erasmus Darwin (Erasmus I), certainly prescribed opium liberally to his patients, including the poet Coleridge, who did become addicted, but the only drug use I could relate to Erasmus III was his consumption of laudanum as he approached death, a dosage which was medically prescribed, apparently by Emma Darwin, Charles Darwin's wife, presumably on his behalf. Charles, appropriately enough, described himself as a "speculatist," Gillick-like, and went on to develop a highly successful scenario.

In Gillick's *Erasmus Is Late* historical characters spend much of their time in discussion, which takes place at a dinner party in London (Great Marl-

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LIAM GILICK, *BAR—LITERALLY NO PLACE*, anodized aluminum, gray and orange opaque Plexiglas, *COUSIN—LITERALLY NO PLACE*, anodized aluminum, gray and blue opaque Plexiglas, *EVERY DRINK AVAILABLE IN THE BAR*, vinyl text on gallery wall, all 2001, installation view, Galeria Javier Lopez, Madrid / *BAR – BUCHSTÄBLICH KEIN ORT*, eloxiertes Aluminium, graues und oranges Plexiglas, *COUSIN-BUCHSTÄBLICH KEIN ORT*, eloxiertes Aluminium, graues und blaues Plexiglas, *EVERY DRINK AVAILABLE IN THE BAR*, Vinyltext an der Wand. (PHOTO: JAVIER CAMPANO)

borough Street, to be precise) or in a tunnel complex beneath the White House in Washington. Their discussions draw both on events or pseudo-events in the past and on predictions of the future (or “previsions” as Gillick calls them). He is particularly fascinated by the concept of the “scenario” or “artificial case history,” as developed by Herman Kahn at the Rand Corporation. A scenario, according to Kahn, was a “hypothetical sequence of events constructed for the purpose of focusing attention on causal processes and decision points.” It is designed as “an aid to thinking,” through which one can “force oneself to plunge into the unfamiliar” and encounter, inevitably, issues of plausibility and implausibility. As one reads his magnum opus, *The Year 2000*, with benefit of hindsight, it is hard not to wonder at the gap between his previsions from the sixties and the reali-

ties of today. However, this misses the point—as Gillick would surely agree—since the purpose of an imaginary scenario is to stimulate thought in the present, rather than to predict the future with total accuracy.

In Gillick’s world, we are taken back into the past from the point of view of the future. Through time-shifts Masaru Ibuka can end up talking to Harriet Martineau, who many supposed would one day marry Erasmus Darwin—although, as it turned out, he died a confirmed bachelor and she a confirmed spinster, thus revealing the dangers of “prevision.” (Recent biographers have asked whether Erasmus was perhaps a homosexual and Harriet a lesbian, possibilities no one had the temerity to propose at the time.) What all of these people have in common is a relationship with the future—thus Harriet Martineau imagined

what we now call “globalization,” writing in her little book, *Dawn Island*, for example, about the conversion of benighted Pacific Islanders to the religion of Free Trade. Gillick stresses the significance of “time-slips” in his own writing, the juxtaposition of different points and periods of time, the re-molding of time to create paradoxes and anomalies. One of the books he often cites is Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, published in 1888, but, like Kahn’s projection, set in the year 2000, the year in which its protagonist, Julian West, awakens from the hypnotic sleep he has enjoyed since 1887 to find himself in a state-run “utopia” ruled by a managerial elite, who appoint him to work as its historian.

In his own writing about art, Gillick often uses the same kind of time-slip in order to make a point. Thus, in a conversation about British art in the eighties, published in 1991 in a book which he himself co-edited, *Technique Anglaise*, he observed that “a lot of older work from the sixties and seventies seemed very exciting again. Certain conceptual and minimal work seemed, in the eighties, quite radical, interesting and worth reconsidering.” The key word here, in the context of time-slip, is “reconsidering.” Our judgment of art is itself subject to time-slip, to reconstructions of the meanings of the past, to failed scenarios of the future, failures of prevision from the point of view of the present. Perhaps Liam Gillick’s interest in the idea of looking backward—to Victorian days or the Kennedy White House or Bellamy’s America—is bound up with the realization that scenarios put forward in the past often turned out to be wrong in the long run. Robert McNamara himself recognized how wrong he had been on a number of issues—asked by the press whether he was going to write his memoirs, he retorted by listing a series of disasters: “Memoirs! Don’t you fellows remember the Edsel? The TFX? Vietnam?” Elsie McLuhan’s son Marshall may have been right to foresee the arrival of the “global village” but he was wrong to think it would be brought about by television, when actually it was because of the World Wide Web, the fruit of a rather different technology.

In other words, we are always proposing scenarios, discussing them, using them, but we can never be sure what the shape of things to come is really going

to be. Part of the problem for the contemporary artist is that art has come to be seen in terms of a constant forward movement, which requires that both artists and critics are continuously fabricating scenarios of the future, worlds of “what if” which propose hypothetical paths to their own utopian outcomes. The whole idea of an “avant-garde” is a temporal idea, like the idea of “modernity” or “post-modernity” or “futurism,” all of them much-used art-historical terms. The art world is filled with its own Kahns and McLuhans peering into an uncertain future, discussing possible scenarios and offering guidance to the professionals—in this case, gallerists and museum directors rather than Air Force commanders or Secretaries of State. Yet even artists are involved in forecasting, not to speak of “plunging into the unfamiliar,” as Kahn put it. The art world behaves more and more like a futures market.

Liam Gillick’s work is distanced from this art world by reason of its complementary relationship to the artist’s own writings, but it is also, of course, part of the art world. Thus *IBUKA PART 1* (1995) is, in Gillick’s own words, “an installation which includes all the basic elements required to begin thinking about the staging of the musical *IBUKA!* which is to be based upon the book *Erasmus Is Late*.” Among its elements are scripts, speakers, tables, halogen lights, a painted stage, and a manuscript file and information boards. In similar style, other works have related to the book *Discussion Island/Big Conference Centre*, containing such items as wall designs, a series of screens, a bookcase, a pile of newspapers, a set of platforms, a hi-fi system, a large glass containing eight cans of Seven-Up (an allusion to an episode in the book). The preferred materials are pine planking, Plexiglas and anodized aluminum, a combination in keeping with the basic aesthetic idiom of a Conference Center in the real world, but suitable for presentations which “try to initiate different possibilities of reading.” The twenty-second floor of the Big Conference Center is characterized as having false ceilings, silencing carpet and windows down to the floor, creating an atmosphere on site, which provokes at least one user to commit suicide.

Many of Gillick’s installations have a cool seventies-style corporate feeling, places in which, accord-

ing to the scenario, "orange leather is bound together by a tubed steel framework" and "the frame tubing is chromed to high brightness and cuts slightly into the padded leather." The walls are chocolate colored, somehow appropriate for the site of "a think-tank about think tanks," in which "a series of findings will be processed" and parallels will be drawn between one historical period and another in an effort to create a firm foundation for understanding our own "über-pseudo-global-free-market economy." The scenarios to be discussed will be utopian, of course, even though we understand that "failure is at the heart of all utopias." Yet once a scenario has failed, as it surely will, we are still left with a residual nostalgia—nostalgia for the lost ability to hope. Failure generates a longing for this lost sense of hope. Recently Gillick photographed locations which Stanley Kubrick used for *Clockwork Orange*, images of urban development at Thamesmead, reminding us of both the bleakly dystopian vision of Kubrick's film and the failed utopias of city planning, two sides of the same "what if" coin.

Utopias are traps. Yet Gillick is quite clear that he does not wish to include the democratic socialist tradition under the same indictment. In fact, "to abandon it all in favor of an ironic position now is to misunderstand what post-modern analysis was about." Gillick's stance is avowedly "postmodern." His intellectual climate is one of "think-tank scenarios currently under development"—neither ironic nor inflexible, but tied "to a mess of contradictory possibilities." No clear final conclusions can be reached. Instead, there will be an open process, an ongoing discussion, bricolage and recycling. We are going to work "in a series of parallel directions," not in order to reach a point of resolution between competing trends but "to create a certain aesthetic, a certain look that would represent tomorrow." Of course, this is a perilous enterprise, as we know from the history of art. The search for a "look that would represent tomorrow" has long haunted the art world. It takes us back to The Independent Group (Richard Hamilton among them), creators of the exhibition "This Is Tomorrow," opening at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London in 1956, just one year after Sony had marketed their first transistor radio, Ibuka's

brain-child, and after Henry Ford II had given his go-ahead to the Edsel, Bob McNamara's first nemesis.

As Judith Barry has noted, in her book, *Public Fantasy*, the Independent Group combined group discussion with exhibition design—exhibitions which, as Barry notes, "consisted of panels of various colors and degrees of translucency which were distributed along modular grids," an aesthetic which immediately reminds us, looking backward now from the future, of the installations designed by Liam Gillick. Barry characterizes two types of design—theatrical and ideological. Gillick's commitment is plainly to both, to theatrical re-enactment and to ideological reflection. He refers us back both to the discussions that took place among the guests gathered at Erasmus Darwin's dinner table and to the very different discussions that took place at the Rand Corporation. In the absence of any such contexts for today, Gillick has created his own possible worlds—his constructed works have been designed as sites for an exchange of ideas provoked by a series of the WHAT IF? SCENARIOS (1995–1996), hoping to produce, in the best of all possible worlds, a scenario for the development of options (within the art world?) complete with overviews and interim conclusions, perhaps leading, indirectly, to a hypothetical sequence of future art works.

LIAM GILLICK, *DELAY SCREEN*, 1999, anodized aluminum, Plexiglas, installation view at Jonathan Monk's exhibition, Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York / *VERZÖGERUNGSSCHIRM*, eloxiertes Aluminium, Plexiglas.

