

Art Review:

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The problem with any retrospective is that there's a natural tendency to reflect on closure. And that stops discussion.

FEBRUARY
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Milan vs. Turin

Which one is
really Italy's
art capital?

I, Dorkbot

The geeks who
are inheriting
the earth

Hungarian Cinema

Plotless,
characterless
and making
a comeback



Liam Gillick

Now you see him, now you don't

Luc Tuymans
talks painting with
Wilhelm Sasnal



New York Reviews Marathon
4 critics, 7 days, 104 reviews – phew!

A photograph of a man with a beard, wearing a dark blazer over a dark V-neck sweater and blue jeans, standing in a gallery space. Behind him is a large, floor-length blue curtain hanging from the ceiling on thin rods. To the left, there is a dark, curved sculpture and a small red stool. The floor is dark and reflective. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows.

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photo: Liam Gillick by Nick Haymes





LIAM GILLICK

Now you see me, Now you don't

Having been given a series of retrospectives in major museums, the British artist decided to 'regift' half of the exhibition spaces to the institutions that gave them to him in the first place. What's he playing at?

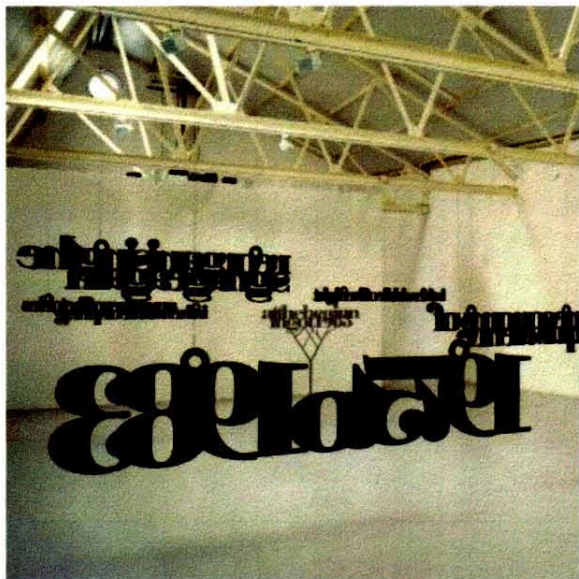
words J.J. CHARLESWORTH
portrait NICK HAYMES

MIAMI ISN'T THE FIRST PLACE YOU'D EXPECT TO FIND LIAM GILICK.

And he seems slightly surprised to be there too. The palm trees, sunshine, tanned bodies and easy, paper-thin glamour of South Beach don't quite sit right with this unstoppably cerebral artist. Gillick's complex, elliptical activity has, for two decades, ceaselessly navigated the gaps between art and curation, between the institutions of culture and the world of politics, moving between installation, sculpture, lecturing, graphic design, writing and architecture to create a sustained investigation of the structures and systems that define art's relation to our current neo-liberal epoch. The kind of questions this raises are not much on the minds of the hordes of gallerists and collectors gathered here for the week-long art-fair madness that is Art Basel Miami Beach, perhaps. But art fairs are an excuse for the artworld to get together, and Gillick will soon be speaking on a panel discussion about art criticism, before returning to a freezing New York to prepare for a year of his retrospective exhibition, *Three Perspectives and a Short Scenario*, starting off at Rotterdam's Witte de With, and then on to Kunsthalle Zürich, before moving to the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in early 2009.

Retrospective? For an artist whose work has long questioned the conventional distinctions and boundaries that define the role of the artist, and who prefers to slip continuously in and out of any one given or fixed type of activity, the idea of a midcareer retrospective seems strangely conservative – the standard accolade bestowed on the 'important artist', the institutional pat-on-the-back that puts his greatness beyond question. Gillick is usually full of questions. So perhaps, I suggest, this is not going to be the usual type of retrospective?

Gillick grins. "It's a retrospective in the sense of being that moment where things turn and you suddenly become the subject, which isn't typically how I've tried to work. In common with many artists of my generation I use 'displacement techniques' a lot to find ways to play with time, in order to suspend the moment of focus or judgement. And although in the past I've done a lot of exhibitions, in none of them have I been the focus. So what I've done is to turn the idea of the retrospective exhibition around on itself again, and offered 50 percent of this somewhat retrospective exhibition back to the relevant curators."



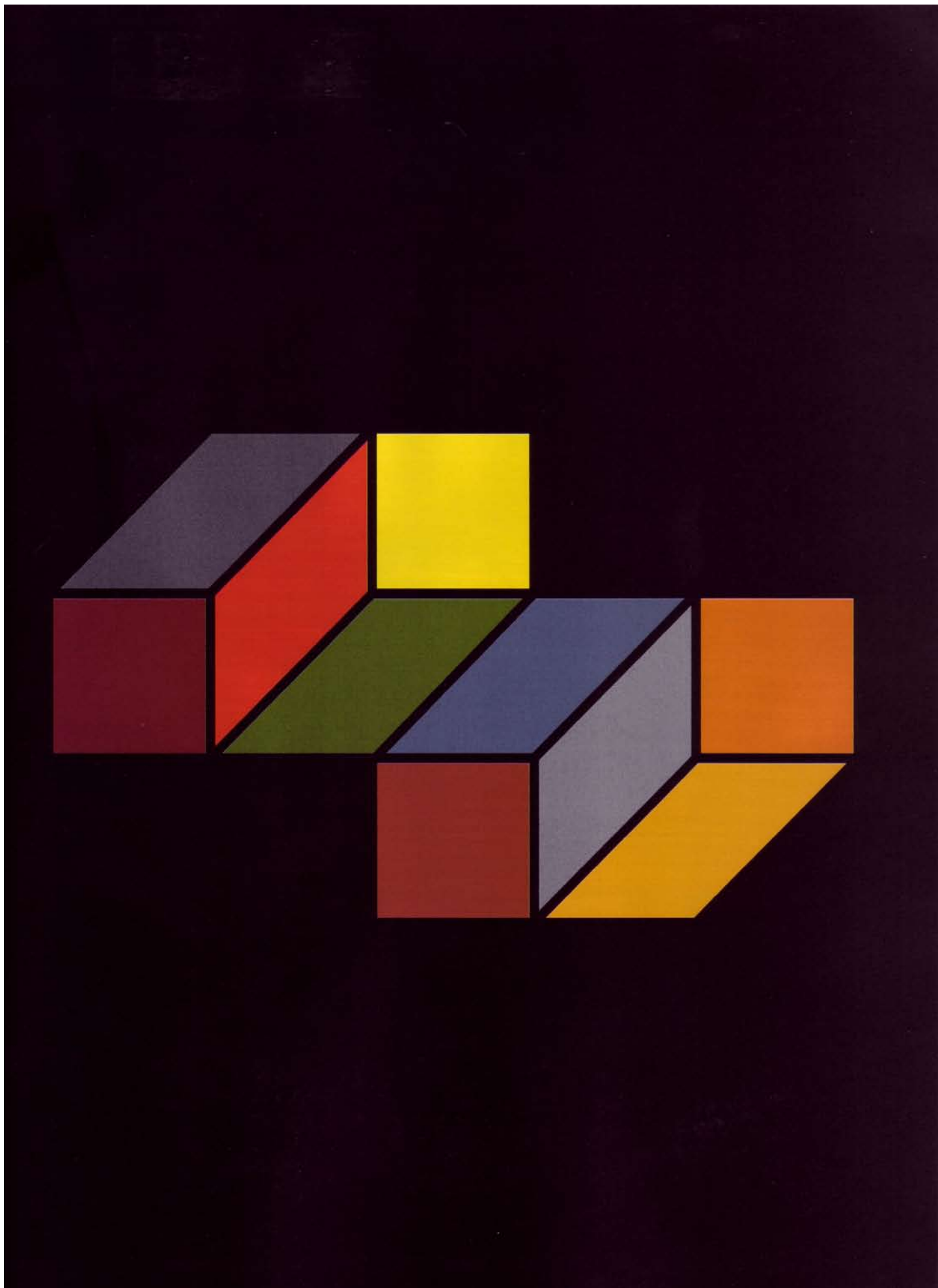
It's a manoeuvre typical of Gillick's approach, both slight and apparently technical, but also playfully perverse, cutting to the quick of how the artworld divides up its institutional powers – those that dictate which artists get to be seen and which do not. So what was the effect of Gillick returning half his midcareer showcase to the institutions that had offered it to him? "It caused chaos, initially, and some mild panic," Gillick says with a laugh. "But I did it deliberately to question to what extent that generation of curators, people who are about my age, feels responsible in terms of authorship, and in terms of how they work with artists. There's often been an assumption of parallelism between artists and curators, an equality of involvement, but there's a certain point, as curators move up through an institutional hierarchy, where that idea of parallelism can't be sustained indefinitely. I wanted to problematise that idea that they could retain that parallelism continually."

Gillick's ongoing interest is in the 'interstices' of art as an institutional production, trying to locate the points where a line is supposed to be drawn between artist/author and curator/presenter. It's an approach he shares with a generation of artists and curators that emerged in the 1990s – artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija or Philippe Parreno, and curators such as Nicolas Bourriaud, whose term 'relational aesthetics' now serves as a catch-all for artists who, like Gillick, choose to focus on the relations that exist within artistic presentation rather than accept them as given. It's a perspective that has produced a lot of discussion about the curator-as-artist, or curator-as-author. But what started out as a sort of self-critique of curatorial power among artists and curators has often slipped into an uncritical acceptance that artists and curators can easily swap roles, without acknowledging what really distinguishes making art from curating it. Think of those 'authorial' curators whose names are often more prominent than the artists they present – Hans Ulrich Obrist's Lyon Biennial last year, in which he selected selectors to select the artists, is a good example – and one notices that if the curator can become an author, it's much harder for the artist to acquire the curator's power.

For Gillick, his retrospective carries the danger of reasserting those traditional distinctions: "The problem with any retrospective," he says, "is that there's a natural tendency to assess or reflect, or assume a degree of closure. And that stops discussion, because you're naturally dealing with what was, rather than what will be. So I wanted to find a method to artificially stimulate a degree of anxiety, and begin a discussion again about this exhibition that was not focused on the work itself, and the way to do that was to say, 'By the way, you're going to have 50 percent of the space back, what are you going to do?' So instead of assuming a friendly middle-ground parallelism, it would mean that we would have to have a real discussion about a real subject."

So what did the institutions choose to do with Gillick's 'gift'? At Witte de With, Nicolaus Schafhauser's team have decided that they will be showing younger artists. Gillick says he was a bit critical of this, not wanting to appear as "the nice middle-aged guys being nice to the younger artists". At the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the curators have decided to use their half of the space to present earlier works by him, paradoxically creating a more formal retrospective of 'older works' next to his more provisional installation. It sounds like a curatorial hall of mirrors: Gillick holding a mirror to the art museum, as it tries to focus its attention on him. And in a final twist that takes the scenario to an almost absurd end point, Kunsthalle Zürich's Beatrix Ruf has decided to run a programme of time-based work, inviting Gillick back into her half of the exhibition to collaborate on the programme. "Regifting," he jokes, explaining the *Seinfeld*-inspired American etiquette of giving gifts that were themselves gifts in the first place.





“The problem with any retrospective is that there’s a natural tendency to assess or reflect, or assume a degree of closure. And that stops discussion”



But what of Gillick's own half? For each venue he says he's only providing four clear elements: a slatted screen structure, separating the two halves of the show but allowing viewers to see through to the other side; two posters that represent the split and the binarism of the show; a big table of what might be seen as 'historical ephemera'; and what Gillick calls a 'film machine'. One of the posters is a strict geometric design derived from the graphic style of the 1950s and 60s Ulm School of Design in Germany – authoritative, sober and didactic. The other is a big poster of a little man: "He was something I drew on a plane, when I was first thinking about the exhibition. This little man looks something like Venezuela's best-loved cartoon character. It's clearly something friendly, like from the Olympics, or some sort of potential mascot. And he represents the impossibility of trying to do the exhibition from my perspective." The little man looks startled, worried, unsure.

It's the 'film machine' that is causing him the most headaches right now. He's busy putting together software that will generate a sort of pseudo-filmic narrative of images from 20 years of his work, a sequence that will be voiced over by a voice synthesizer that Gillick has adapted to sound like a cross between 'a psychotic and a recruiting sergeant'. This hectoring voice will read texts taken from a number of lectures Gillick presented last year at unitednationsplaza, the alternative art school and residency programme in Berlin. Their purpose, Gillick says, was to try to work out whether it's still possible to proceed with a discursive, critical model of practice, in a period that appears dominated by an all-encompassing social and political 'middle ground' – an authoritarian voice proposing reasoned speculations about what might be possible rather than unchangeable. In a period in which we're told that the idea of politics is supposed to be over, Gillick says he's trying to find ways to operate critically in that middle ground, trying to create situations that reflect on the provisional and the potential, refusing to accept things 'as they are'. In one broad stroke, we've shifted from a cartoon figure to the widest analysis of contemporary politics, via the institutional mechanisms of staging an art show.

Gillick's layered, multifarious, fugitive approach, refusing to adopt the conventional role of the artist, continuously adapting and cross-referencing different positions of activity, referring art-making to a bigger intellectual project, is what makes him so difficult to pin down – to the frequent frustration of those who would prefer art and artists to stay neatly in their place. Operating everywhere and nowhere at once, slipping in and out of view – artist, curator, critic – and refusing to be pinned down keeps everything open, ready to change. ■

Liam Gillick, Three Perspectives and a Short Scenario, is on view at Witte de With, Rotterdam, until 24 March. See Listings for further details

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Presentism, 2005
installation view, Corvi-Mora, London

The Commune Itself Becomes a Super State, 2007
vinyl on wall, 230 x 590 cm

A Short Text on the Possibilities of Creating an Economy of Equivalence, 2005
installation view, Palais de Tokyo, Paris

Two images for posters representing the binarism in Liam Gillick's retrospective

All works
courtesy the artist and Corvi-Mora, London