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LIAM GILLICK
PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS
 AN INTERVIEW BY SAUL OSTROW

For over 20 years, Liam Gillick has addressed the question of how art has been used to advance a broad range of social and ideological agendas, and to subvert and exploit the material and political structures that order contemporary life. During this time, he has developed a situated practice, one that is site specific in both conceptual and physical terms. Having no studio other than his laptop, Gillick determines what he will do at a given location by employing "scenario thinking," a methodology that permits him to focus on how the contingencies of a given site—corporate headquarters, institutional space, the public domain—offer differing opportunities for him to exercise his relational and comparative critical processes. The works that result subtly underscore the indeterminacies and uncertainties that inform both Gillick's own practice and the forces that sustain a collective or social reality.

In 1996, Gillick—along with Jorge Pardo, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Carsten Höller, Christine Hill, Vanessa Beecroft and Maurizio Cattelan—was included in French critic/curator Nicolas Bourriaud's exhibition "Traffic" at CAPC Bordeaux in France. In his essay for the show, Bourriaud coined the terms "relational esthetics" and "relational art" to describe the strategies of these artists, whose works he understood to be resisting the closure and instrumentality of standard accusatory social critiques by instead probing social relationships. The highly charged program for "relational art," which takes the whole of human relations and their social contexts as its subject, would appear to be at odds with the minimalist sculptures made from colored Plexiglas and aluminum (they recall room dividers, bookshelves, storage units) for which Gillick is perhaps best known, though they amount to only a portion of his diverse production.

Indeed, there seems at first to be little that is critical about Gillick's installations of these "sculptures," which reference the work of Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd and Dan Graham, and seem more concerned with mixing

the classic modernist principles of De Stijl and Constructivism with Pop-ish color and a corporate esthetic. But by installing these sculptures so that they have a precise spatial relation to one another, and through the titles he gives to each series and the individual works within it, Gillick seeks to expand our reception of the works to include a consideration of issues of production, distribution and consumption. In other projects, Gillick employs graphic design, wall painting, architectural and curatorial interventions, films and animation, art criticism, novellas and collaborations with artists, architects and writers, all to create situated works that reference and reflect the social, ethical, political, and ideological conditions and dilemmas that circumscribe art, artist and audience, and—by analogy—society as a whole. He has also published a number of books that function in tandem with his artworks.

Born in 1964, Gillick graduated from Goldsmiths College, University of London, in 1987. Having shown extensively in Europe and the U.S., his first major solo show in London, "The Wood Way," appeared at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2002. That same year he was a nominee for the Turner Prize. Today, though seemingly constantly traveling, he lives and works in New York. In January 2008, a retrospective, "Three Perspectives and a Short Scenario," opened at the Witte de With, Rotterdam, and the Kunsthalle Zürich. It will travel to the Kunstverein München in September 2009 and to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago [Oct. 10-Jan. 10, 2010]. This interview took place in the artist's New York apartment in the early spring, just as Gillick was preparing to leave for Venice, where he will be exhibiting in the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

SAUL OSTROW How is it that an Englishman who lives in New York ends up in the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale this year?

LIAM GILLICK Well I think to a certain extent it comes down to changes in curating that have happened in the last

20 years. The fact is that I'm part of a generation of European artists who really move freely across the borders of Europe, and this also happened to coincide with a new generation of curators who maybe in the past might have become writers or critics. To a certain extent I'm viewed by curators as representative of that generation. I've worked in Germany a lot, and I've shown in Germany more than any other place. I also think it's a bit of a test, like a moral or ethical game. A little bit like saying, okay you feel so comfortable here, you feel it's such a generative and productive context, what happens if we actually put you in such a symbolic situation? Will you just carry on like normal or are you going to have to change something? So, to a certain extent, it's a test.

SO Nicolaus Schafhausen [curator of the German pavilion] is based in Rotterdam?

LG Yes. And that's quite interesting.

The relationship historically between the Netherlands and Germany is quite complicated, to put it mildly. Nicolaus was viewed with some skepticism when he arrived in Rotterdam to direct the Witte de With, and understandably so. Here you have someone coming to Holland from a very well-funded—I mean they're both well-funded—and historically complex cultural terrain. [Schafhausen had been the director of the Frankfurter Kunstverein.] There can be some tension, but I'm quite impressed by the way he seems to function there without becoming what you could call a typical person who goes to live in the Netherlands because they want to become part of a certain model of liberal society. He's not that. He's still trying to keep some antagonism there, a little bit.

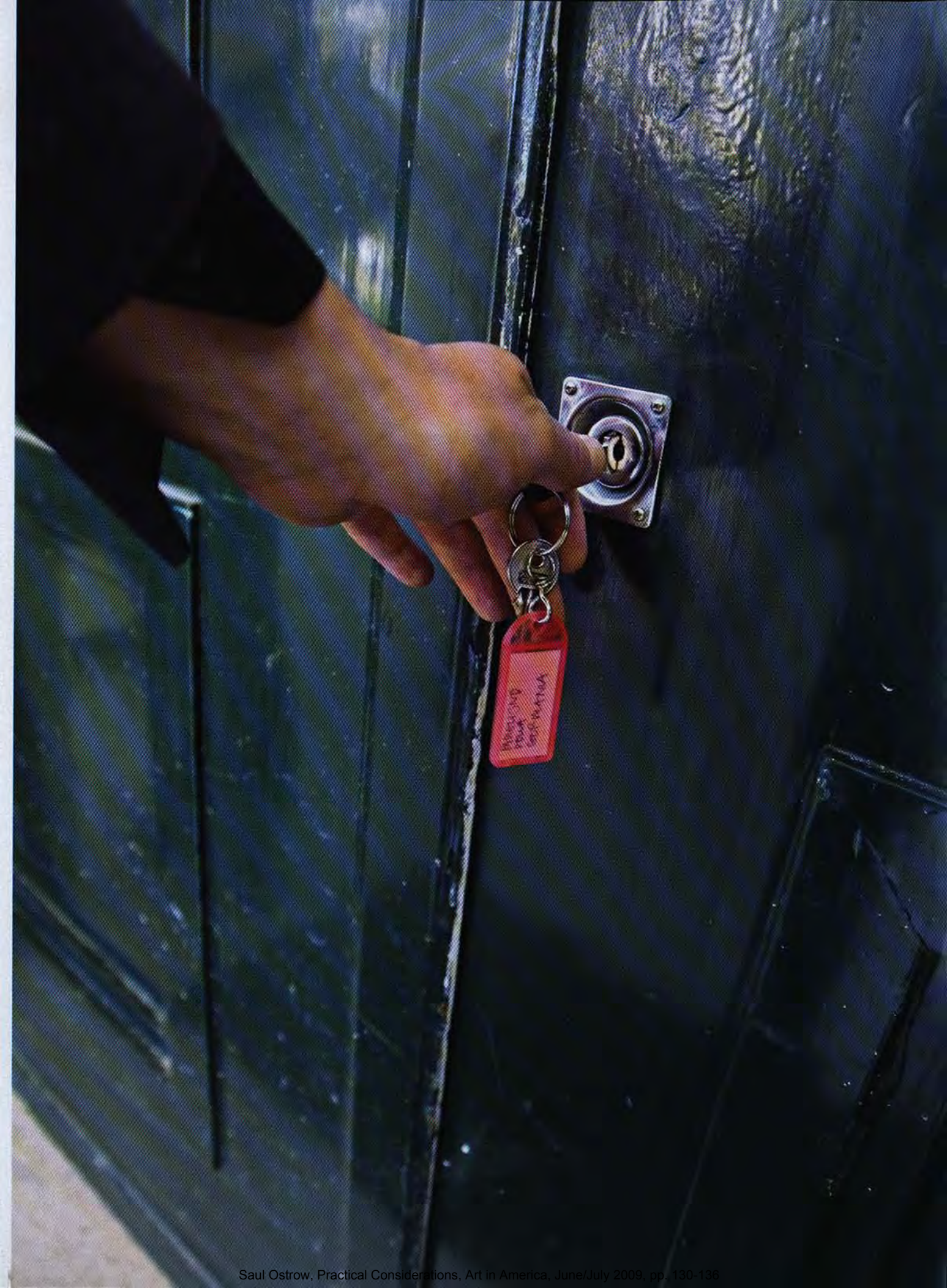
SO He hasn't become polite.

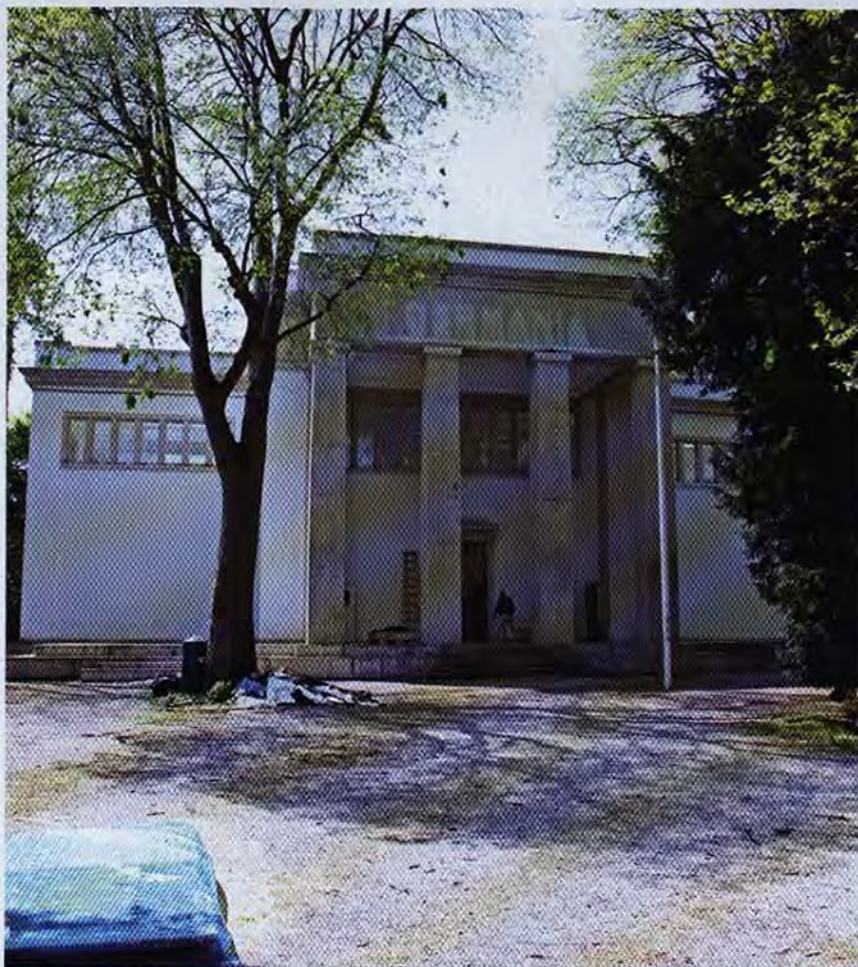
LG No, definitely not.

SO And you first knew him as an artist?

LG Yes. I met him as an artist. That background does make him rather different from most other German curators who are on a high level. Curators' salaries were linked to an academic scale, so that if they don't have a doctorate in art history

Right, Liam Gillick unlocking the door of the German Pavilion during his April 2009 visit. Photo courtesy the artist.





Gillick's snapshot of the German Pavilion.

they don't get paid properly. Nicolaus comes from a more improvised and mutable background—he started as an artist and then opened a private gallery, Lukas and Hoffmann, and he showed people like Olafur Eliasson and Henning Bohl when they were young. It was a rather self-conscious Cologne gallery in the early '90s. Later, he took over a space in Stuttgart called the Künstlerhaus, which is a bit like a non-profit; it's much less of an institution and more of an equivalent to something like White Columns in New York. Künstlerhaus always operated at a slightly different level. Nicolaus doesn't come from an academic background. But he has a very precise relationship with artists and he likes artists. Maybe that's a stupid thing to say.

SO We all know curators who just like art and would rather the artists go away.

LG Absolutely. The artist for those curators is an impediment to the trajectory of critical theory. What's crucial to understand about my relationship with Nicolaus is that it has always been rather fraught.

I think that's the case partly because he was an artist and because he's been in so many situations where I have been. There's an assumption that long-term relationships always mean conspiracy or collaboration, whereas, in fact, in personal relationships there's a kind of frustration. I think that Nicolaus views some of my trajectory as being a parallel life he could have had, and vice versa. And he's very conscious of the dangers of it, the delusions of it, the weaknesses and strengths, so he's often trying to put me into situations that are quite difficult. It's like giving someone a gift that's a pain in the ass.

SO You worked with Nicolaus at Witte de With. Has it become more collaborative with you two? Is it a call and response relationship? Does he throw this challenge at you?

LG No, but you know that feeling you get when there's a hidden agenda. You do a show and you work with someone, and people have certain modes of behavior that indicate a degree of freedom, for example, and gradually that's moderated by whether they really like that work you did then, or they're really interested in

this aspect of your work, and that's what they really want to put across. You gradually work out with this person the hidden agenda, and you either fight against it or you don't, or you let it wash over you. The weird thing about working with Nicolaus is that he does not do any of those things. And sometimes he'll even disappear.

SO Is that the reason why, when we first exchanged e-mails, you still didn't know what you were doing for Venice?

LG Yes, but now that it's me who's doing the "disappearing," I'm making him anxious, because I have a basic framework and a structure that I can describe a little bit, but it's absolutely incomplete at this stage. I have decided to leave many aspects unclear until the last minute. If it has to be a secret to others, then it ought to be a secret to me, too. We started to work in April. So I can turn it around. I think he's conscious that people often try to give me a context, or they give me a job, or they have, say, an understanding of a dichotomy that might be in the work that they want to be there—extend one side of it, or reduce another one, or resolve it, or something, whereas with him, it's interesting. He has a kind of strange ambition for someone to do something new, which in a way seems quaint, the idea that you could do something new.

SO So this becomes an opportunity for you to extend your work?

LG Yes, every time I've worked with him I've done something that's been a major shift in the work. But he has not manipulated me into doing that; he has somehow created the productive environment where I end up stuck, or I end up thinking. I enter into a different critical relationship with my own work, and strangely enough he does that through offering a very complicated idea of anything being possible.

SO What has become imperative with the pavilion, with it being Venice, your own work and this relationship with Nicolaus?

LG I had to ask myself a lot of questions that I think people have always asked themselves in the postwar German art context, but also as someone who has happily worked there for 20 years. I definitely suffered because I want to do something serious, but I can't make a parody of being serious. I mean, what's serious? But I think my work's reasonably serious anyway. I've been invited because of what I do, so if I suddenly make this whole project an exception to what I do, as it were, then that's not why I was invited. But the question is, is this an exception? So is this the moment when you knock down the building, and you start again?

SO That's been done.

LG Well one of the early ideas I had, which I still like, was when I went to look at the building in October last year. It's a bit like buying a used car—I'm not really sure what to do on these site visits. There's an architect who looks after the building—he's a very nice, elegant German architectural historian—and he is the guardian of the building. So I'm wandering around, and I looked at the floor, and I said, can I drill into the floor. What about these bits here? What's behind that? And he said, well, we'd rather you didn't drill into the central room floor because it's new-ish, but in the four side rooms you can do what you want. And I thought, that's a really odd thing to say, because surely it's normally the other way around—you can't touch the original floor but you can touch the new one. And then I realized that Hans Haacke hadn't dug up the whole floor in 1993. It's funny how much that's an enduring myth. I even read it in a magazine the other day. But he only dug up the central room. I thought, well, as an exception maybe I should step outside the normal, rather convoluted track of my work, and just call Hans Haacke and say, do you want to finish the job? And we'd go over to Venice together, and dig up the rest of the floor that Hitler and Mussolini walked on. And that would be a serious project, maybe not one for me but there could be some logic to it. Because whatever you think of Hans Haacke, for a lot of people that's seen as a very important work after the Berlin Wall. It's the first post-Wall statement, and it's a troubling one. It's partly saying even though the wall's come down and even though things are getting fixed there's still a big problem. Do you see what I mean?

SO At least in my reading, your work never enters that symbolic realm.

LG No. But it did occur to me that maybe it should. Maybe this is the exception. I thought, I'll talk to my dealer in London at Corvi-Mora Gallery. He's Italian, and I said to him, if I wanted to knock down a building in Venice, how difficult would it be? And he said, in the winter time, everything's possible. Someone gets the wrong papers . . . everything could be done.

I know it's very rude to be a guest and then smash up the room. But, you know, you have to think about all these possibilities. If this is so bad—and every German critic and journalist who has talked to me has only asked me

initially about Nazi buildings—and if it's such a horrible symbolic site, maybe something should be done about it, and it shouldn't be tolerated. When I was there in October, I looked around and I thought, if I knock down this one, then I better knock down the British pavilion, too, because it looks like a colonial building in a way. It's got a lavatory, it's got a kitchen, it's got all the things you'd need to survive when the natives are surrounding the building. Then I thought, well I'd better knock down the Italian pavilion as well, because that's real Fascist architecture, not just renovated. And you wouldn't know where to stop. If you took it to its logical conclusion it would be horrific. What I did instead is I asked a rhetorical question in a way, because I half knew the answer. I got a reply from the guy who looks after the Documenta archive, and he said there was a plan by Arnold Bode, the guy who started Documenta. Bode designed a building in 1958 to replace the original German pavilion. But because money was tight and it was a difficult time, what he proposed was to use the basic concrete framework of the building—it's actually a modern building underneath all that stuff—and turn it into a standard post-war German modernist building. So the first thing I did for the whole project was make a 3D computer model from Bode's drawings. I'm working on producing what's going to end up being an edition. It's kind of a red herring in a way, but it's an edition that for the first time builds an actual model of this building that he wanted to do.

SO Then what we're talking about is a scale model?

LG Yeah. The edition of Bode's proposal will be about 50 cm by 50 cm [roughly 19½ inches] by 30 cm [nearly 12 inches].

SO It's an object.

LG Exactly, a thing. But that's a good way around the problem sometimes. What you do is you imagine. What if I didn't have to deal with all of these questions everyone is asking me, especially in Germany, about this Nazi building? What if, in 1958, they'd done another building that looked just like the Scandinavian pavilion? Would it have been any different? Would Joseph Beuys have been the subject in 1976 of an amazing series of photographs of a man who looks absolutely devastated standing in a rubble-strewn building, attempting to do something? Would

Richter's portraits in 1972, which are very precise and very stark within this rather churchlike building, have been there? None of this would have been there. It would have been a double-level kunsthaus. None of this has got anything to do with what I'm doing in the end, but I found it productive in a strange way to start by doing something that isn't really what I'm known for.

SO So the first imperative was the history.

LG It was more of a slightly belligerent response to repeatedly being asked what I think about showing in this building. Sometimes, to be a bit glib, I'd say you know I've shown in Fascist and Falangist buildings all over Europe. I've shown in Malaga in Spain; I've shown in the Haus der Kunst in Munich. I'm an expert at showing in these kinds of spaces, along with all the other people who have shown in them.

SO What's interesting here is doing away with the building. A kind of erasure.

LG What I thought I would do is to switch off the building. How do you switch off a building? Well, I'll be surrounded by Steve McQueen [in the British pavilion], Mark Lewis [in the Canadian pavilion], and Haegue Yang [in the Korean pavilion]. Maybe I can just join these people and make a film, too. That's a good way of switching off the building. You don't have to see it—you walk in and it's dark, there's nothing there. I haven't talked to anyone about this before. Partly because of you asking to do this interview—I started to think, how can I control the sound in a building like this, which would be a dark building. So I looked at various soundproofing techniques and different sound-baffling structures to break up the sound rather than carpeting the place. I don't see a carpet in a Fascist building. I don't want people lounging around on the floor or feeling too comfortable. It's just like that Kippenberger painting with the title *With the Best Will in the World I Can't See a Swastika*. I found myself up in the middle of the night doing renderings on the computer of this sound-baffling system that I'd worked out for the walls. It involved my standard lexicon of geometric hard-edged applied modernism, and I was looking for swastikas in the shadows that were being cast in the gloom and I thought, I have to stop, I'm losing my mind, what am I doing? So after working on it for months, I abandoned this attempt to switch off the building. Then I thought, I'll make

a science-fiction film, because in the postwar period the one thing Germans can't do is make a science-fiction film. It doesn't exist—maybe it can't exist. I started to think, what can I do that cannot be done in Germany? If they invite a fellow European to do something, what can I bring and show them how to do? So I embarked on this process of thinking somehow it's possible to make a very complex and serious science-fiction film without any actual planning, or a crew, or script. I went to Chicago, bought a camera, this fancy camera, and filmed the snow. I thought if I do enough establishing shots I'll end up with something. I even came up with a title—it would be episodic, 10 episodes, 12 minutes each, and it would be called *Trick City*. It just seemed like a good name for a science-fiction film.

SO A sequel to *Alphaville*.

LG Yes, that's exactly right. When I'd exhausted the Greek alphabet and the word "stadt," I realized I had to move on to a different thing, so yes, the *Trick City* is like the *Alphaville* of 2009. I even scouted out Roosevelt Island. The primary master plan was done by Philip Johnson. You've got the American who was influenced by European high modernism but somehow is a complicated character with rumors about his past and all the complicated stories. Then you've got this attempt to make a kind of European-style instant housing project. It's the most European part of New York that I've ever been to. But again, it's not my work. And then, of course, I thought, I should just not do it. I should say I'm sorry, I can't. I have no ideas. Why not? This would be quite interesting. You send out an e-flux announcement saying, the German Ministry is pleased to announce that Liam Gillick has no ideas.

So I ended up writing, which is often the way I work through things. I wrote a long text that I gave as a talk in Berlin in March. Given several of the things I'd said about Nicolaus being a very complicated but very generative non-collaborator, I'd had some pressure to do the typical contemporary thing, which is create a series of panels, or discussions, or something around an event. I kept slipping into becoming a different person. I had good ideas for other artists for the pavilion. I realized part of the problem was this looming discourse, and there's this notion that

I'm supposed to be interested in discourse. But it doesn't mean I want to have one. It doesn't mean I want to be programming one.

Then I said, I'll do one event, and I'll try to account for myself, I'll try to talk about what I'm interested in, in a very simple way, and that unlocked a lot of things.

SO Readers of your work can range from those who don't like it at all, who consider it opportunistic in how it moves about, to others who see it as highly political but can't identify how. In my reading, it's an attempt to understand the difference between coming from discourse and being part of discourse.

LG I completely agree. I need a context to work within, so what seems to be opportunist is in a strange way a correct reading, because in fact the work didn't evolve and then find a site—it evolved alongside the sites and the contexts. Also, I don't think every artist has to deal with their biography, but I come from a background of strong identification with Irish Republican politics, which is full of subterfuge, misleading statements. It's not imbedded in my way of seeing things, but when I'm told that the correct way to be a politically conscious artist is to have transparency throughout everything you do, I'm not sure that I think that every politically conscious activity is surrounded and best served by transparency. So while I have moments of clear positions, they're often muddled by this distrust of transparency, distrust that the good artist and the good political artist is always a transparent artist, who will always reveal sources, desires and needs.

SO How do you think the politics of Venice will come to circumscribe you, or is that a consideration?

LG I never think that national pavilions are that interesting, frankly.

SO No, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the notion of English artist, German pavilion, this curator.

LG It's not a radical move, frankly. I mean if you really wanted to do something, there are people or groups or individuals within the society who would have much more symbolic capital by doing this. It comes back down to this question of, can I just continue like normal? Maybe this is a big problem. Maybe it means that the German self-conscious postwar agonies are being marginalized. Or maybe this is a

difficulty, and if it is, it doesn't necessarily fix anything. For sure, it's got nothing to do with fixing anything. And I'm not a group of Kurdish activists, where I'd have a daily need to be on the street, an urgent political requirement to function in a certain way.

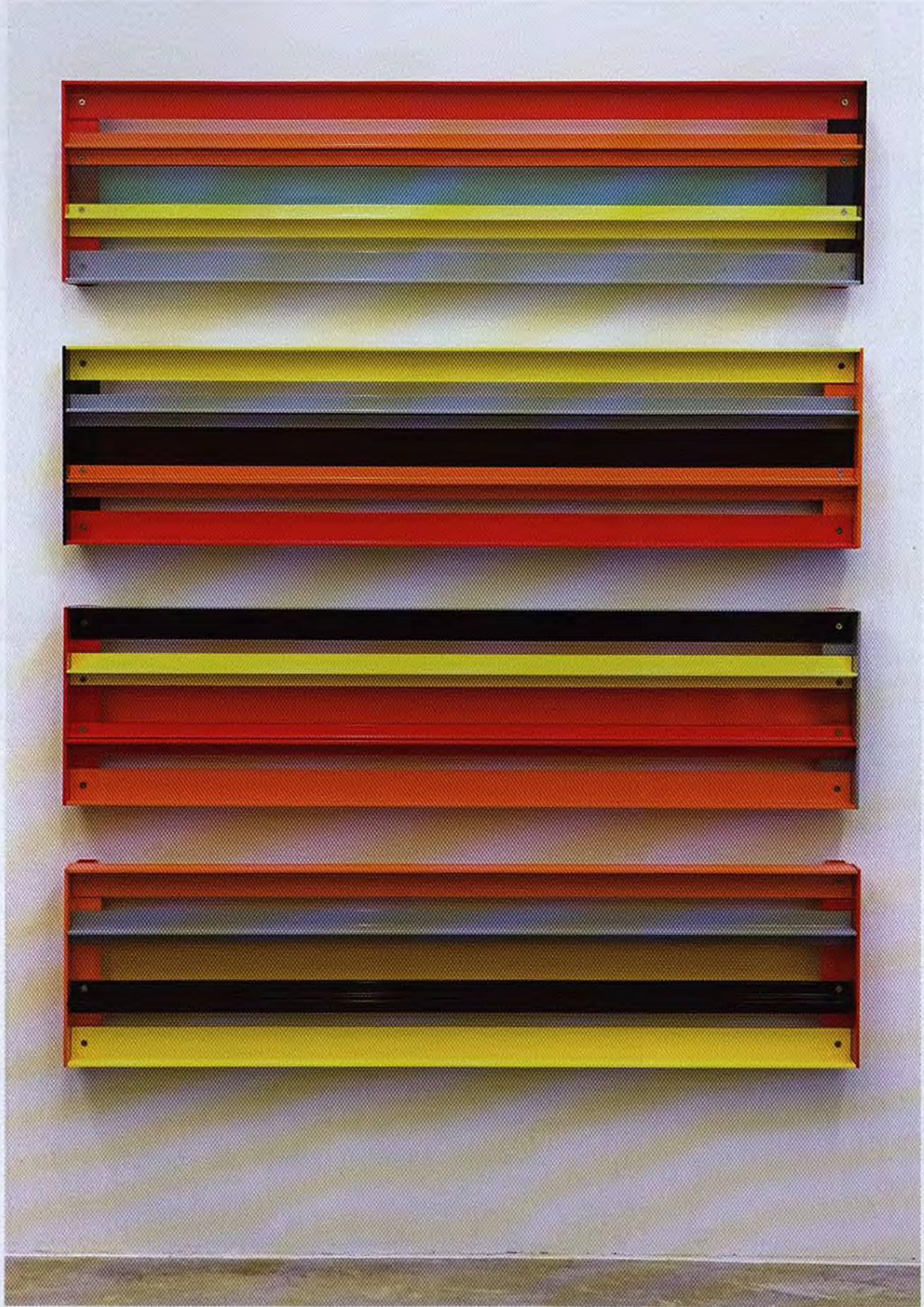
It's more about, if everything seems to be fixed, and everything seems to be rolling along very nicely, and every few weeks another new space opens, and we all welcome Angela Bulloch and Olafur Eliasson and Jonathan Monk to come and hang out and live in Berlin and cycle around on their bikes and have a good time, what happens if you put someone like me in the German pavilion? Does it mean that this is all fine? That the new Berlin life is all fine? That everything has been working out just great, and this is just another German building?

I'm not sure. I'm convinced that what will happen is that . . . I don't know what will happen. That's the answer. I'm surrounded by questions. One thing is for sure: one thing that's very interesting and very productive about working in Germany for years has been the fact that people ask questions. So for an artist like me who started with no vision, deliberately in a way, and no ideas, in a strange way—lots of ideas but no idea, singular—it's been very productive to work in a context where people ask questions. And then also when you respond, they might return to the question again, but in new form. Let me put it another way. One of the first questions I had from a mainstream journalist in Germany was, "when you win the Golden Lion for Germany, how will you feel?" Such a great question. And of course I revealed my background by saying, "I didn't know it was a competition." And they looked slightly horrified when I said it. But you know, the biggest danger is to be sucked into what is a very possessive and very serious cultural context.

SO Okay, so given that you decided not to make the sequel to *Alphaville*, what comes next as a possibility?

LG Well, I can't be too precise about it, but . . . I'm very interested in the history of applied art and the his-

Gillick: *Developmental*, 2008, painted aluminum and Plexiglas, four elements, each 11 7/8 by 47 1/4 by 3 1/8 inches. Courtesy Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York.





View of Gillick's *Mirrored Image: A Volvo Bar*, 2008. Courtesy Kunstverein Munich.

tory of applied modernism. I became very interested in Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky [Austrian architect and designer, 1897-2000], the woman who designed the Frankfurt Kitchen. Schütte-Lihotzky lived in Russia, she was a good Communist and a good Marxist, and she did good work. She designed a kitchen to make life better. She designed kindergartens. There's only one book about Schütte-Lihotzky in print, containing the drawings and the thinking about the avant-garde that I find interesting. It shows you how to use a kitchen. There's something everyday in this, and I think in a way this is a great anti-Fascist book. Now, it's not a great anti-Fascist book in the way the anti-Fascist collages are great, but it is because it claims the domestic in a different way.

I'd always joked with people about the fact that in a Fascist building there's no toilet, there's no bathroom. And in fact the German pavilion technically is not up to code for a German public building. It has no rest area for workers, no lavatory, and nowhere to make tea and coffee and keep the beer, and so on. So I went through a number of other deracinated Michael Asher possibilities, like getting the budget and giving it to a bunch of contractors in Italy, and

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just giving them a little list that says it needs a toilet, it needs a rest area, bathroom, but without specifying what to do and just seeing what happens. I'd arrive in Venice and who knows, they might have done a very nice thing.

But in fact the answer is to stop thinking about art in a way, to stop thinking about the recent history of German art, and stop thinking about what gets done in that pavilion, and start thinking about it as a working environment, and what had been done in the past to make things better, and how they'd failed or succeeded. So that's where we are. That sort of brings us up to the beginning of April. I'm making a workshop there to a certain extent. I've worked with a fabricator in Berlin for the last 10 years, and we work very closely on things, but we hardly ever meet. Basically they're all heading out on Apr. 12, and we'll convene in Venice and we'll start to work.

There is a belief that the pavilion idea has to be embargoed until the last second, because somehow there's this myth that they open the doors and everyone gasps when they see the Bruce Nauman video, as if they didn't know what it would be.

This is really counter to my working method. The worst thing is that you're not supposed to talk about it until it happens, until the morning

of the 3rd of June. People have said things like, "How are you going to deal with this?" or "What project are you working on?" But they view it as an exceptional moment, so I'm trying to find a methodology that allows me to still have ideas. If I'm not allowed to really talk openly about it, I can talk about some ideas. We've rented apartments in Venice, and amongst us we'll create our own kind of semi-commune, where ideas can be generated and can be executed quite fast. A lot of people e-mail and say, oh you must be really deeply stuck in working on Venice and so on. And I say, oh yes, I am. Because I am thinking about it. But the question really is how do you find a working method or a working, productive context within which ideas can be produced? And that's really the key. It doesn't help you to know whether you'll arrive and there'll be no building, or there are great toilets, or a large number of rather mute, corrupted formalist artworks. I became truly free—in fact I'm not stressed at all—when I realized the problem wasn't what to do, because if I'd asked myself over the years, what should I do, I probably wouldn't have done half the things I've done. I would have done a different kind of art. ◊