

Every Collection is a SCENARIO.

The unusual encounter between *Liam Gillick*, artist and *Marc and Josée Gensollen*, contemporary art collectors.

Curated and Edited by Francesco Garutti

Marc e Josée Gensollen, psichiatri, abitano la Fabrique, una grande residenza-deposito nel cuore di Marsiglia dove gli spazi progettati per il lavoro e quelli dedicati alla vita privata si mescolano agli ambienti che accolgono la loro collezione d'arte contemporanea.

Liam Gillick è un artista britannico, vive tra Londra e New York. Il suo lavoro è stato esposto nei più famosi musei del mondo e nelle più importanti esposizioni internazionali. Dagli anni '90 sino ad oggi la sua pratica artistica, e il suo costante lavoro parallelo di autore di testi e critico, esplorano le relazioni tra l'arte e segnando in modo deciso un punto di svolta e mutamento nella storia dell'arte degli ultimi decenni.

Uno stato di "cecità iniziale" caratterizza la pratica creativa dell'artista così come le prime scelte di chi decide di collezionare. Ogni raccolta di cose è una narrazione il cui plot ci è sconosciuto, non è mai riconoscibile in partenza. Il principio è spesso una selezione accidentale e coincide con un'assenza di immagine, una mancanza visiva. Ed è proprio da questo spazio vuoto, enigmatico e potenziale che parte il nostro racconto:

L'insolito incontro tra un artista ed una coppia di collezionisti.

FG: Looking back now, how did it all begin?

MJG: The collection started when we were students. And after our marriage in 1974, for the next five years we acquired mainly surrealist drawings and prints. This art movement, with its references to psychoanalysis, matched our professional concerns at the time. But the projective nature of intrapsychic processes to be found in those works gave way, following the exhibition inaugurated at the Centre Pompidou with the Marcel Duchamp retrospective, to conceptual art. This enabled us to stand back and evolve our critical gaze.

FG: How would you define your collection?

MJG: The collection is the fruit of mutual consultation, since a work picked by either one of us cannot be acquired without the other's approval. The reflexive dimension of the pieces collected since that period has been organised around a conceptual spine with no limit to the media employed. Since the works were chosen only by ourselves, the critical dimension, the space accorded to communication, humour, mockery even, the questioning of man, identity, society, art, pedagogy, culture, cities and civilisation, and the transmission of knowledge, are the common denominators of our choices.

FG: Liam, do you collect?

LG: Broken old cars. But only one at a time.

MJG: In addition to artworks we can say that we also collect books. Plus other objects.

FG: What was the first artwork of Liam Gillick that you bought? Could you describe your early contacts?

MJG: Our first contact with Liam dates back more than fifteen years ago. H. U. Obrist was there, at the same table as Liam's; they were speakers at a seminar in Geneva at the Saint Gervais European Culture Centre. Liam spoke during the session on the Contemporary scene, a question of representation. Liam presented "Erasmus is late: video factions". Invited to the same seminar, we had spoken on the eve of that session, on the subject of Autoscopy: the Aesthetic Paradigm. Liam's paper read the following morning had surprised and interested us, for no plastic artist had to our knowledge adopted an approach of this kind to their work. From then on we became interested in his work, and the first piece we acquired was his "Regulation Screen" in 1999, at the Schottle Gallery.

LG: Yes, Marc and Josée have a very good memory. I remember they were just "there" – present and curious. I thought at the time that everyone would be like this. But later realized that their sensitivity was rather unique. They were early people committed to the work – and this is something that an artist does not forget. They have an autonomous role as collectors. They work in parallel to the work. And do not interfere – but are not passive either. This is something to acknowledge.

FG: How would you define the role of the collector nowadays?

LG: Well, they are part of a new generation of collectors who do not merely accumulate things towards the creation of a perfect demonstration of taste. The dynamic collector today is engaged with the workings of an artist. Being involved early or continuing a relationship over time as the work develops into strange and unpredictable directions. A good collector comes back to an artist over time but they also create a parallel narrative that does not necessarily coincide with the matrix of curating and institutional thought. Nor does it always match the intentions of the artist. The collector often creates a new way of thinking about what art can do now – via the creation of a set of relationships that stand outside the logic of the institution.

MJG: We agree entirely with Liam. If one were to describe the role of the collector as we envisage it and which is the one we want to play, it could be summed up as commitment. As soon as a collection becomes fairly well-known, the collector is naturally shouldered with certain responsibilities towards artists as regards the presentation of their works and their settings. Our feeling is that a collection should be easily accessible to people concerned who want to get to know contemporary creation better. And another aspect of commitment is the idea of sharing. "The artwork constitutes a meeting-place for the transmission of knowledge, in which to compare views and for an accompaniment, a pedagogy even, linked to the reflection aroused by the works displayed. Certain works by artists need, to interact with visitors. The collector at that point plays an active part in the functioning of that exhibit. Sometimes it is even the collectors themselves that are involved as performers in the activation of an artwork...

FG: Liam, do you feel any responsibility as an artist?

LG: Absolutely. The responsibility to function as an artist in the society. The politics inherent in an artists practice are always revealed in their production. It is impossible to avoid some kind of responsibility – it is just that the nature of that responsibility cannot be assumed to be towards a better situation.

FG: When I met Marc and Josée in Marseille for the first time, they defined their house as a kind of "meeting house". I had the chance three works of Liam in there...What is exactly *la Fabrique*? Limits between public and private seem to blur in that architecture.

MJG: The limits between private and public space are blurred, as this depends on how involved the visitor happens to be. Convinced that Marcel Duchamp's definition of a work of

art is right, we have made our collection a “meeting-house” that ought to have appealed to the master.

The Fabrique, a former industrial site converted with the aid of architect H.Sylvander, is effectively a meeting-place. We asked him to make it our home as well as a place where we could exhibit live art. We needed a space suitable for the presentation of installations, video-projections and in situ works. It was in our eyes pity to leave the collection in crates or scattered across museums and other art centres. We had to have an exhibition space, but we could not imagine ourselves not living there too, because relating to artworks is for us an indispensable daily exercise. We imposed a working rule on ourselves: the collection can be visited by all, provided they fix an appointment directly with us: after 10 pm on weekdays and during the day at weekends when we are at home.

FG: I am deeply interested in the assonance that creates between the work of Liam and the practice of Marc and Josée as art collectors. I’m referring to this idea of the display is a narrative system, a set that associates a space to a story. Am I wrong if I imagine the body of installations and informations that compose your narration, Liam, as, in a way, a collection of parts, a *composite assemblage* that is able to produce a discussion, a discourse?

LG: Yes, but maybe it does not account for the active political aspect of the work and its extreme specificity. The work is not about discussion or discourse in general. But always provides key moments to consider and develop from. The work is always partial and complete at the same time. Within each given structure there is some doubt about where the “art moment” might be. The moment of significance is always shifting. I am constantly trying to navigate around questions of extreme significance to the formulation of the political as a lived experience. I am interested in material facts but strongly aware that there are none that exist unaffected by the effects of the social. My work does not create literal settings for discussion or discourse but points towards ideological spaces for reflection upon these aspects of social life.

FG: Do you think art can produce reality?

LG: It does. There is no way for art to produce anything other than a reality. Lawrence Weiner talks about the function of art in the production of simultaneous realities. This interests me a great deal.

MJG: On the other hand we could say that art produces only fiction, often opening our eyes to realities that would not have appeared to us without its intermediacy.

Thinking to Liam’s work in relation to our practice we could say that it fitted quite naturally into the Fabrique. Its relationship with space, text and communication predestined it to be well situated in the place.

The Fabrique is a place open to the city, a place of exchange, for comparisons of different points of view, dialogue, and sometimes controversy. After all, Art is nothing if not a stimulus to shared communication and reflection on specific points of view.

FG: Is there a particular exhibition you would define crucial for your life in the arts?

MJG: The Documenta. Edition number 5 curated by H.Szeemann and number 10 with Cathrine David.

LG: I’d say the exhibition by James Coleman at Studio Marconi– “Slide Piece”, 1973. Of course I didn’t see the exhibition as I was still in primary school in England. But the idea of the work has haunted me since I first read about it in the early 1980s. The book “Six Years” by Lucy Lippard also sets the stage for everything that comes after.

FG: “Six Years” is about the dematerialization of the art object in the end of the sixties early seventies... In relation to that we could say that the work of the emerging generations of

artists is getting less and less related to the production of objects to be set up in a space, their activity seem to be more like a set of strategies, shifting contests and modifying the systems of content distribution. What will be the meaning of collecting in the future?

MJG: We could say we are not prophets, but a whole lot of the collection is already oriented towards a dematerialised art form.

LG: In terms of institutions it should start to look more carefully at what is collected compared to what is shown - as there is increasingly a gap between the projects that museums want to exhibit in order to demonstrate their engagement with the culture and what they then collect.

FG: What is a museum for you nowadays?

MJG: A museum today ought no longer to be a tomb in which to preserve relics.

LG: A museum is a place that is in a process of upheaval. The potential of the museum is only now being tested. Many forces are at work competing over the cultural capital of the museum. It is crucial for artists to engage in this time of change even if they find the process oppressive.

FG: One year ago Liam worked inside a Museum Collection. Title of the project was : "The one hundred and sixty-third floor: Liam Gillick Curates the Collection" at MCA Chicago. Could you tell us more about this experience at the MCA?

LG: I think it is very important to consider art in the context of all other art. At the MCA my first task was to read through the archives of the museum and look at every exhibition they have shown since 1967. I wanted to examine whether the collective memory of the museum matched what actually took place. I selected work based on a number of criteria then addressed how this might be expressed in relation to a revised sense of the museum's own history. The criteria I used to chose the work was complex and somewhat intuitive. A desire to show things that hadn't been seen for a long time; a desire to educate myself about the "local" in terms of specific histories in Chicago; and a need to show that my interests in other art are not merely a reflection of my own values. At the same time I worked with my notes from researching the exhibition history and devised a way to account for each year of the museum's existence. I made notes of things that had happened that could not be accounted for in the collection. It was this list of moments and happenings and events that I used for the exhibition captions. So each work was accompanied by a caption showing the title and year of work itself combined with another year that represented a chronology of the museum along with a list of important unaccounted for moments.

FG: A sort of parallel narration.

LG: They carried an alternative history alongside clear information about a given piece. But in fact the exhibition worked well by creating a semi-autonomous thought space alongside the experience of an actual concrete material fact. It was this space between the experience of a work and a collective memory that created some resonance.

FG: How does the practice of collecting change in relation to the ever-changing notion of Time?

MJG: Difficult to say, since the end of the 1960s we have been familiar with ephemeral works, or with works that can be reactivated by challenging the rules of everlastingness.

FG: Rem Koolhaas says that amnesia is a typical condition of our time. The amount of information increases but our capacity to remember it doesn't. Is collecting a way of

recording?

LG: I think the comment is indicative of its time – it is a post-modern comment that romanticizes the notion of memory. I am not convinced by melancholic statements about memory in the face of new technology. But I am also unconvinced by the idea that a free-flow of information is by its nature democratic.

MJG: The acceleration of information does not encourage the fixing of memories. Collecting in the sense that we intend by it means accounting for the past and for history.

FG: Are you interested in ancient art too?

MJG: We are certainly interested in classical art, which was the contemporary art of our ancestors.

FG: And what about the youngest generations, what do you learn from young artists?

LG: That they redefine the context as well as the content. The best always do this.

FG: Marc, Josée, whose advices do you trust when you buy arts?

MJG: We trust only in our consultation and in the reflection induced by a work. We listen nevertheless to what the artist, gallerist or critic may have to say about it.

FG: Have you ever bought art pieces directly in the studio of the artist? Actually what kind of place is the artist studio nowadays? Does it still exist as a place for the production of artworks?

MJG: Yes of course, but we prefer to interpose the interface of the gallery to focus on work and avoid including an emotional relationship in a possible acquisition... Thinking about the studio.. We'd say that since Buren's teaching we have been bound to note that art can be created in situ without the studio, in the traditional sense of the term, being an indispensable place of creation.

LG: The worst thing you could do with most artists is put them in a room with lots of material and lots of time. Studios have increasingly become showrooms for artists – or ways to demonstrate lifestyle choices. Neither of these things interest me.

FG: What do you think about commissioned art pieces? How much is interesting for an artist to work with the limitations imposed by a commissioned work?

LG: It is extremely productive to work within a context that is pre-determined. There is no other way. The traditional gallery space is no more free than a street corner or the rooms of a beautiful villa.

MJG: We are more and more oriented towards the commission, which is the means of getting closest to art in progress. All the same, we leave the artist free to choose.

FG: Who would you say is the real owner of an art piece? The artist, the collector who bought it? Is the artwork in a way always public?

MJG: The true owner of the work is the person that loves it. All works of art will be returned sooner or later to the public, to the great joy of all.

LG: No. Art can always disappear. There is a tension between the public and private that cannot be dissolved by thinking about the relationship in abstract terms.

FG: I understand what you say... referring to this Liam I read that you like the idea of a disinterested spectator. Can you better explain this concept?

LG: The disinterested spectator is one who has no intention of regarding the work as a connoisseur or activated spectator. It is the person who is walking by or on their way to some other event. I often talked about my own work as functioning best when you turn your back to it. This means that I am conscious of the idea of witnessing other people in relation to the work rather than the idea of a group of people who direct their attention to something. I am interested in the secondary experience. Eating while surrounded by work; walking by a work while talking on the phone. Experiencing a museum or exhibition as a distracted group rather than alone. There is a politics to this. The notion that art is a social production that questions relationships rather than cementing values.

FG: That's very interesting. How do you imagine the future of the exhibition as a cultural device? Arranging displays and shows will still be the future of the art system? I consider the failed project of Manifesta 6, an exhibition conceived as a school, as a crucial moment

MJG: All the consequent exhibitions teach us something new and enrich us. We actually have our reservations about taught art and about the academic risk.

LG: The most radical exhibitions now have a strong pedagogical base. But this has also meant that more and more academics are involved in the parallel structuring of exhibitions. They bring their own values with them – forms of interrogation that are not always compatible with the struggle to find semi-autonomous zones of production and creativity. There is as much danger in the instrumentalization of art exhibitions – via education and the promotion of social policies that are linked to public funding as there are in the abandonment of art to speculators and opportunists. We are in a time of struggle within a deeply divided art context.

FG: We're at the end.. Now there's just time for the last question. A very simple one. I'd like to know which is the most interesting collection you've seen so far?

MJG: The Beyeler collection for modern art.

LG: The first one was Nell and Jack Wendler's collection in London. It was the first time I was exposed to art in a private environment, therefore the most interesting.

FG: Thanks to all.

Francesco Garutti is writer and curator. Since 2009 he has taught "History of Exhibitions" at NABA and he's "Culture and Urban Transformation" Professor at IULM University, Milan. He was a researcher and assistant curator at institutions such as GAMeC, Bergamo, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, PAC, Milan. He was a lecturer for the AA in London. He worked as an architect for Peter Zumthor Architekturbüro in Switzerland. He writes regularly for Domus, Frieze, Mousse and kunstbulletin, Zurich.