

# Liam Gillick: Unleash the Butterflies: The Failure of Culture in the Face of Brexit

e\_flux 

Jul 8



*\*This text was first published in **German in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung** on July 4th, 2016. It is published here in the original English with permission from the author ([@liamgillick](#)).*

I returned to London last week from my New York home to vote “remain”. My London apartment is in the centre of the City of London, and in typical English style the voting location is a shabby Church of England church. When I arrived around midday I was

[back to e-flux.com](#)

handed me my ballot paper. The church was also hosting a second hand book sale and selling homemade cakes. I joked as I left the building that this was probably against EU regulations as the smell of old Fredrick Forsyth paperbacks and homemade fruitcake might push voters towards Brexit. The election officers just stared at me.

As I placed my cross on the paper I felt a wave of emotion that I was doing my part to ensure a continuation of European fellowship, continuity and peace. I dismissed my strong feelings as dumb sentimentality and returned to my apartment confident that Britain would vote “remain” for philosophical and historical reasons, and not economic or nationalistic ones. It turns out that along with the entire “elite” British art world I was wrong. A great many working class British people don’t like the European Union and at the heart of their suspicions is a misunderstanding of Germany’s role in Europe and complete ignorance of its contemporary culture.

In 2007 I was invited to represent Germany at the 2009 53rd Venice Biennale. I would spend the next two years working closely with curator Nicolaus Schafhausen to navigate what was intended to be a reflection of the new Europe we had both matured in. Both of us had been in our mid- twenties when the Berlin Wall fell and we had subsequently operated freely throughout the new Europe as the Union expanded and borders fell. For Schafhausen it was now to be seen as “normal” for a fellow European to represent Germany. As an artist “representing” Germany, I repeatedly told journalists and critics that I expected to be treated the same way as a German artist. I expected robust criticism and reluctantly received it from some quarters, notably this newspaper.

One my first interviews about Venice was in 2008 in Munich with a journalist from a local newspaper. His first question completely threw me. “What makes you the best?”, he asked with a smile. I was baffled, as I didn’t think this was why artists were selected for exhibitions. The Germany I had exhibited in for the previous fifteen years had always challenged the notion of hierarchies and dumb ideas about quality. On the contrary, to work in German “culture” meant to be overtly critical of the status quo. It meant a struggle

[back to e-flux.com](#)

be and how it should be understood. Yet throughout the next two years I faced similar questions from journalists. “When you win the Golden Lion for Germany, how will you feel?” was a typical enquiry. What was going on? Art is not a competition. Art is a critical process where all standard notions of value, including who and what constitutes a “German Artist” should be open to question. The German culture I was steeped in was intellectually rebellious, sometimes melancholic and always skeptical. Talk in Germany was always about new modes of art and life. Art was a tool to stir trouble or agitate given structures.

Representing Germany however, appeared to bring another layer of German culture to the surface - the very one that my colleagues and close friends all over the country had obviously known about and been battling for years. My response was to shrug and smile, theirs had been to build in a resistance to nationalist conceptions of artistic practice into their work from the outset. It is this founding principle of artistic existence that drives critical culture. It appeared that my German friends always started from the perspective that there is a deep resistance to their practice whereas my British colleagues had assumed good will and indifference in equal measure.

When the British Ambassador to Rome arrived at the German Pavilion in 2009 to visit my exhibition he seemed merely amused and baffled by my presence there. It took a number of curators and aides to get through to him that it might be completely normal for a British artist to show in the German Pavilion. Still confused he said, “Goodness, maybe we should show a German in the British pavilion one day, imagine that!” The failure of British cultural figures to push the vote towards remain makes us all appear complicit with a tired out of touch elite which has seemed so softly supportive, aloof, yet frequently indiscrete. Leading up to June 23rd, It appears that there were no decent arguments that could be expressed beyond generalized statements of solidarity with refugees, a belief in Europe as a pseudo-utopian project and a rejection of xenophobia of all kinds. German-born Wolfgang Tillmans was heroic. He could see what was going on and threw everything at the impending catastrophe. A lot of social media was used. A typical tweet or

[back to e-flux.com](#)

lost forever”, or “We are the European family”. In retrospect, however well intentioned these slogans may have been, they seem weak in the face of an entrenched suspicion of bureaucratic Federalism and a distrust warm statements of togetherness emanating from a metropolitan elite. In the days leading up the vote the most visible British artists unleashed their best shots. The day before the vote, Artnet.com gushed, “Damien Hirst uses his signature butterflies against Brexit vote.” The petition signed by prominent cultural figures expressed things a little more strongly. But here the arguments tended to be economic rather than philosophical. The petition letter explained, “From the smallest gallery to the biggest blockbuster, many of us have worked on projects that would never have happened without vital EU funding or by collaborating across borders.”

Such statements of fact fell flat on the 23rd June. EU funding of art projects was exactly the kind of argument to push the disenfranchised working classes of Britain ever closer towards Brexit. It is only now that the deed has been done, and Britain has turned its back, that we feel the real passion of the artists. Anish Kapoor is “Heartbroken” (the Guardian, June 24) and feels “shame, shame at the xenophobia of this country”. Ryan Gander told Artnet.com that “I am ashamed to be British.” Such passion seemed missing prior to the vote. The optimistic, collectivist pleas from those who make their life and work across the entire EU and beyond needed to be tougher and more dialectical.

This is where my relationship with Germany began and how it continues. I spent the last few months arguing the hell out of Brexit. I worked every angle. Even on the evening of the 23rd I argued with Tobias Rehberger, gently teasing him on his support for the European status quo. I tried the arguments of the old British left against Europe in search of some decent solutions. These positions are well known in Britain and were precisely outlined – in order to be countered – in the Guardian newspaper by Paul Mason on May 16th.

“The leftwing case for Brexit is strategic and clear. The EU is not –

[back to e-flux.com](#)

hospitable ecosystem in the developed world for rentier monopoly corporations, tax-dodging elites and organised crime. It has an executive so powerful it could crush the leftwing government of Greece.”

Over and over again I rehashed all these arguments with any serious colleague prepared to listen. Prior to June 23rd I never got a decent argument in return. No real dialogue and generally instant dismissal. No one I spoke to could give a response better than “Better together”, “I like Tuscany.” or “In Berlin you can still get a cheap apartment.” The cultural elite in Britain failed to address the real stresses of Europe and counter them with good arguments. This is the failure and shame that will be remembered every June 23rd from now on. The cultural mainstream gave the wrong solution to questions they were not prepared to ask. Now it is their job to address the implications of this vote in the cultural sphere throughout Europe and beyond. We can offer experience of our own failure to speak out and engage from the perspective of humiliation and defeat.

*\*Image of Liam Gillick's German Pavilion installation via PBS*

---

smohebbi

Jul 27

### **It is what it is: the failure of culture in the face of imminent rise of fascism**

In a short text that perhaps had an air of deliberate pretention of “didn't I tell you? Now see what happened” Liam Gillick argued how “[T]he cultural elite in Britain failed to address the real stresses of Europe and counter them with good arguments.” The text in its self-righteousness demanded a response. It was written in a tone that encouraged a reaction from the reader, that asked for a counter argument, a debate; the author, essentially asked to be attacked. Perhaps it was asking all of those cultural elite who before the Brexit vote came out with proclamations such as ““We [heart] EU”, “What is lost is lost forever”, or “We are the European family,” my personal favorite was “Baby its cold out there,” to engage in a dialogue, to come up with something

[back to e-flux.com](#)

many likes they receive on social media. Perhaps we should attack Gillick and to start a debate on how we have failed and continue to fail.

It seems like the ideological inconsequentiality of the art space politics, is now defining the direction of our political and social life. While the art space is compensating for the representational politics in its designated space, without offering it any challenges whatsoever, all to the benefit of the right wing ideology through vacating the political-sphere from the burden of accountability – be it economical, racial and sexual inequalities – the right wing ideologues further attack art's inconsequentiality in terms of quantifiable outcomes and limit its access to national and subsidized financial resources.

While the first decade of 21st century was marked by a self-reflexive turn in the arts that acknowledged the complicity of contemporary art post-globalization in the expansion of the forces of capital and global inequality which confronted the audience with their privileged neutrality by using the parameters of the art space, now we are in an era that the reflexivity has become the basin where artists and institutions merely wash their hands clean and walk to the vernissage dinner self-content. The issue nowadays is not a lack of reflexivity – there is an over abundance of it– rather what to do with it. The catchphrase of our post-reflexivity moment is “it is what it is.”

In the morning after Brexit, most progressive friends on social media were quick to point to leave voters xenophobia and fascism, bemoaning the impending disintegration of the European Union, talking about Frexit and Oexit exit, Nexit and Italian exit, as if directly echoing and stirring the right wing media demagogues. Aggressively self-othering and insisting on their identity differences rather than on shared anxieties, fears and alliances. Calling the leavers xenophobic and racist so they could go on feeling good about their progressive cosmopolitanism. Fascism harvests and reaps the nascent racisms it to its own benefit and to further social polarization only contributes to its ascend.

As Gillick points out they did not and do not respond to the left wing critique of the EU, that “[it] is not – and cannot become – a democracy. Instead, it provides the most hospitable ecosystem in the developed

[back to e-flux.com](#)

organized crime. It has an executive so powerful it could crush the leftwing government of Greece.” As for the art institutions, it appeared that the most significant aspect of Union was the multinational granting possibilities, that in return turns them into touring corporations that contribute to the art world star system. My limited exposure to this was how in at least two occasions we were almost bullied into collaboration with European institutions so that they could qualify for EU grants by giving us the chump change in return. Even though there were absolutely no connection between our context and project with what they had in mind for the artists.

It is hard not to see the similarities between the current moment and 2012 when the passionate seculars and educated intellectuals were quick to scream hardline Islamist, after Western media and governments’ reluctant and rather dismissive acknowledgement of the –however hastily and arguably fraud – elected government, and neutrally supported, if not rallied behind the ‘secular’ military takeover of hard won democracy. We are quick to point the finger: Islamists! Fascists!

How can we respond to the disenfranchisement of the blue-collar worker? to the outsourcing of jobs to multinational sweatshops of the monopoly corporations? to the taxdodging financial elite and the rising tax burden of the middle and lower middle class?

How can we respond to the rising Islamophobia when we are quick to shout Islamist at the elected government? The right demagogues can successfully channel the indignations of the disenfranchised Caucasians, how can the left leaning cultural elite respond to their anxieties without name-calling?

In Los Angeles two new downtown art spaces – a museum and an Institute for Contemporary Art (former Santa Monica Museum) – have announced construction plans. Ironically, while both funded by the most ferocious developers who are directly responsible for the displacement of the low-income residents of downtown LA, their preliminary programing is a line up the most progressive social practice artists. Thus underlining how the supposedly ideologically progressive wing of the art world contributes to the rampant neoliberalization of art and

[back to e-flux.com](#)

can do is to say no to brazen gentrification, which is far more effective than making drawings of the placard holding picketers and make superficial associations between the labor of the artist's hand the workers' labor?

Art should fight against theory and unravel it to play out its outcomes negatively. It is not merely a space for the artist, the curator and the audience to congratulate themselves on their theoretical weightlifting, intelligence and progressive ideas. Rather it is a place for negative criticality, where theory is used not affirmatively, but as a measuring stone, where it is tested out if it can survive the blows of art. Critical art practice is a critique of critical theory. The permissive safety of art space is no longer the battleground for the avant-garde, but rather as Walter Benjamin wrote "forces which in the political sphere lead to fascism could be expected to have a beneficial function in the domain of art." Art's challenge is how to play out these forces and examine their functions. In other words, democracy cannot exist without art. This relationship however, is not dialectical.

---

**carbe****Aug 6**

What struck me about Gillicks article was how seemingly unaware or unconnected it was. Maybe he was trying to start a debate like you said. Yet still few are participating. According to eflux view count from today (6.8.), this thread has a total of 6.8k, yet only your (very elaborate) comment under it.

It suggests to me that not only in public space, but also amongst artists/curators/affiliates, the will to contribute to a discussion is no longer as present as the interest in a topic.

Moving on, there does not seem to be much real dialogue in general. Doubt, objection or counterarguments are not seen as such, but the person that expresses them is excluded almost immediately, seldom with an answer. There is no learning curve, and a global network system does the dismissive rest. And so the fear of contributing keeps itself in place.

Although the art world is full of adoration for academic intelligentia, the academic values of openness or transparency are on the lowest



[back to e-flux.com](#)

interaction. What I do not understand are instances when that tunnel vision gets hostile if presented with a different approach, even when the job at hand is to teach students (hopefully to develop their own voice and not to parrot for kudos), or speak in front of the general public. Not every feedback is informed or golden, but I miss curiosity, certainly empathy, as well as the ability to navigate instead of retreat.

Is it really such a surprise that this intolerance trickles down to young professionals and even the ones that are merely aspiring? How can this foster diversity?

It represents a misinformed notion of what qualified leadership is.

Now how I understand Gillick was that he never saw himself as a leader, not even when participating in Venice 2009. While I find the honesty disarming, it is baffling to me that being a lauded professional since many years would give him any other impression. He is enjoying the perks- is it really possible he would think there are no responsibilities?

The challenging of hierarchies is important and vital in art, and given the bleak European history (that is not an abstract concept but a memory for older generations), it is understandable as well. However just not wanting to be a leader still means that there are people behind you, and the next generations do not necessarily sort themselves out horizontally. Did it start there- I wonder.

The dominant players in art hardly take action for change, either because they themselves are not in a position to do so, or because they do not want to. The latter impression unfortunately pushes more and more in the frame. How for example can the payment issue for assistants (and artists) be solved, if prominent museumdirectors/curators/ galleries and artists express concerns but often do not even factor in that budget from the get-go. How does e.g. Manifesta have ‚honorary‘ workers. I do not understand.

The "it is what it is" from the one side is easily met with the "this is not my job" from the other, echoing terminal phrases of any product helpline.

Is it really such a surprise, that even young curators pinch the pennies, invest when funded in their own publication and name dropping, and

[back to e-flux.com](#)

name of community?

It was reported today in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that Liam Gillick is part of a group exhibition „How to live together“ for 2017. What I would like to see once realized is an exhibition that invites at least some artists where there are no ties to the star curator and his or her posse. No favors for institutions, maybe even include artists where there is prejudice against. Challenge the own perspective, personal and painfully direct. I assume this would never happen as it questions the concept of how exhibitions are done at the moment.

If the question is how we want to live together, should curiosity not be represented? A leap into the unknown, where you might not get what you expect but maybe something else entirely that is valuable in its own right? To see the other as a foreign country where you do not have a map to hold on to, or a guide that guarantees the best touristic spots that you can show off to have visited ? A scary animal that might bite but maybe is just bluffing? Any statement on „How to live together“ starts with oneself and the own attitude.