

DUBLIN

## Liam Gillick

DUBLIN CITY GALLERY THE HUGH LANE

Liam Gillick's art is often emphatically placeless. His most familiar sculptural works merge forms adapted from Minimalism with the faux-cheerful design styles of present-day corporate or commercial meeting areas, from boardrooms to bars. His typically CAD-drawn, RAL-colored, precision-made Plexiglas-and-aluminum structures recall labor or leisure spaces that we might pass through on a daily basis almost anywhere in the world. At the same time, Gillick's design decisions are frequently informed by progressive art movements from earlier eras (De Stijl, the Bauhaus): varieties of functional, utopian modernism that promised a transformed world. His designs are hybrid and homeless, relating to everywhere and nowhere. Such self-conscious dislocation is nevertheless coupled with an ongoing interest in more specific, situated histories. The changing contexts for art's production—and for understanding an artist's place and purpose in society—are regular research topics. (His new book, *Industry and Intelligence: Contemporary Art Since 1820*, cites the rebuilding of European cities after World War II and systems of factory organization in the 1970s as useful reference points for understanding the genealogy of today's art.)

By contrast, local context was acutely important to Gillick's exhibition "What's What in a Mirror" at Dublin's Hugh Lane Gallery. It was part of a yearlong program of cultural events commemorating the centenary of the 1916 Rising—the armed insurrection that led to Ireland's independence from Britain. A significant number of artworks, supported by multiple institutions nationwide, were commissioned in response to this highly charged historical topic, among them notable projects by Willie Doherty, Jaki Irvine, Duncan Campbell, Jesse Jones, and Sarah Browne. Gillick is perhaps a curious recruit for such a campaign. As an artist who has a declared antipathy toward didactic intent or hoped-for profundity in art—he has described his practice as purposefully "aprofound"—he might be an unlikely contributor to a process of commemorative reflection. But *reflection* was, of course, central to "What's What in a Mirror"—an exhibition that, rather than directly engaging with the legacies of revolution in Ireland, invited viewers to interrupt their art-viewing routine by contemplating, again and again, their own self-image.

Eight sets of specially designed, differently colored, lacquered wooden desks and stools, each featuring a circular mirror

Liam Gillick, *Neural Mechanisms*, 2016, birch plywood, two-pack lacquer—RAL 6018, mirror. Installation view. Photo: Ros Kavanagh.



positioned as if on a dressing table, were inserted into galleries and other ancillary spaces. As quasi-domestic fixtures inside this venerable public building, they offered new locations for momentary reflection (in both senses): at the tops of staircases, in quiet corners, and within an existing collection display. Gillick's intervention was commendably restrained, concerned above all with low-key self-questioning—even as it hinted that historical celebrations can become situations of excessive national self-absorption. But as pieces of original design, his furniture also aimed to expand the frame for retrospection, alluding in their simple, elegant form to those European avant-garde styles he has long valued. They shifted our attention from national to international contexts: from our house to Bauhaus.

Given that “What’s What in a Mirror” presented modest additions to the gallery’s interior fittings, a second key context for Gillick’s work was, of course, the institution itself. The Hugh Lane holds the distinction of being the first public gallery of modern art in the world—surely an intriguing site for Gillick to temporarily adapt. Rooms dedicated to French Impressionism, Francis Bacon, and Sean Scully, for instance, represent different effects, extremes, and lineages of the “modern” in art. As we wandered from one of Gillick’s desks to another, we passed or glimpsed such contrasting modern visions, sometimes catching their reflected image alongside our own—each time, maybe, seeing ourselves a little differently in the mirror as those modernist icons appeared and disappeared in our background.

—Declan Long