

Meaning Liam Gillick

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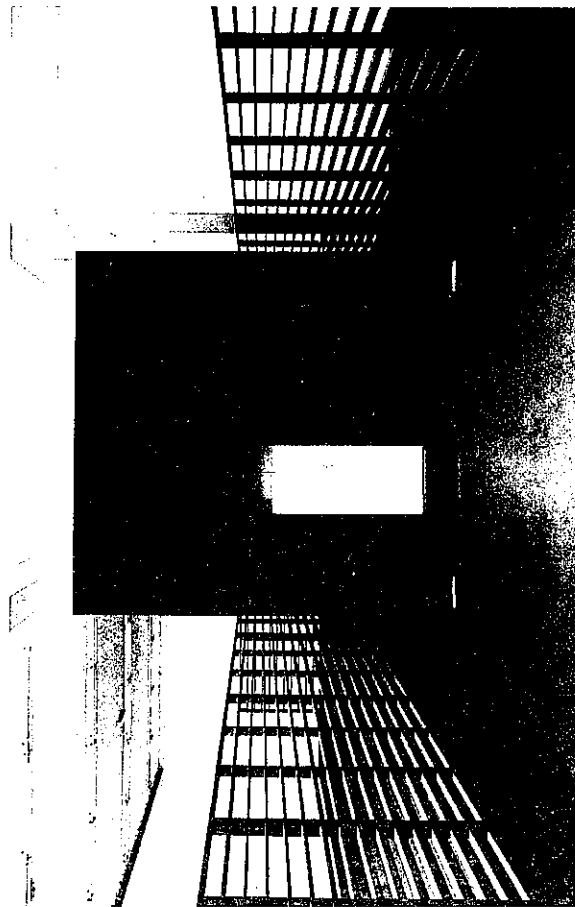
Liam Gillick
Three perspectives and a short scenario
Exhibition view: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2008
Photo: Bob Goedeveagen

(Stop) Making Sense

Sven Lütticken

The Writing on the Wall

Liam Gillick's *Three perspectives and a short scenario* is a fitting artist's retrospective for the age of the e-flux announcement, with its explosion of indirect information about projects not seen in person. Whereas a seemingly comparable "retrospective" by Rirkrit Tiravanija in 2004/2005 consisted of empty spaces that emphasized the absence of the original pieces, whose social and performative nature does not readily lend itself to representation in a retrospective, the gray walls, carpets and fence-like screens of Gillick's "perspective" at Witte de With did not purport to re-create the dimensions of the spaces in which absent pieces had once been exhibited.¹ Their structure was one of radical alterity; it did not evoke an unrecoverable real, the aura of unique moments in time, but rather denied that there is any auratic real to be represented, even in absentia. The two-floor exhibition, which had the overall feel of a trendy mausoleum, contained only posters and publications in a large cubic vitrine and a projected Apple Keynote presentation with sound providing some sort of overview of Gillick's work; while images of his



previous works appeared and disappeared on various rectilinear sections of the projection, text which similarly faded in and out offered a version of Gillick's master myth of the closed or repurposed factory, marking the transition from the Fordist to the post-Fordist age.

When Marcel Duchamp radically split the work of art into two components, the Large Glass on the one hand, the Green Box on the other (both bearing the same full title, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*), the physical artwork became its own doppelgänger. From the Romantics to the Symbolists and the early abstract painters, the *Kunstwerk* was of course supposed to be more than mere matter, a manifestation of some kind of transcendent idea. Increasingly, however, the artwork's "immaterial" side came down from its idealist cloud and took on the comparatively tangible form of writing. In Duchamp's case, these writings were highly idiosyncratic texts reproduced in an equally idiosyncratic form, as facsimiles of original handwritten notes; they emphasized that the linguistic "explanation" is itself as problematic as the visual component of the work, and that Duchamp, like Mary Poppins, never really explains anything. In keeping with this, his notes appropriate elements from various types of writing, popular science in particular, to construct a self-cancelling, ironic discourse.²

Once discourse production became a crucial factor in art with the neo-avant-gardes of the late 1960s and early 1970s, an ironic mimesis of often incompatible types of utterances became an important aspect in the writings of Robert Smithson, Dan Graham and Marcel Broodthaers in particular; their resolute opposition to modernist notions of "pure visuality" also entailed a refusal to embed their work in anything smacking of the normative discourse of modernist art criticism, its criteria and its

1 Tiravanija's *A Retrospective (Tomorrow Is Another Fine Day)* was first shown at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. See also my review in *Artforum* vol. XLIII, no. 6 (February 2005): 164–165.

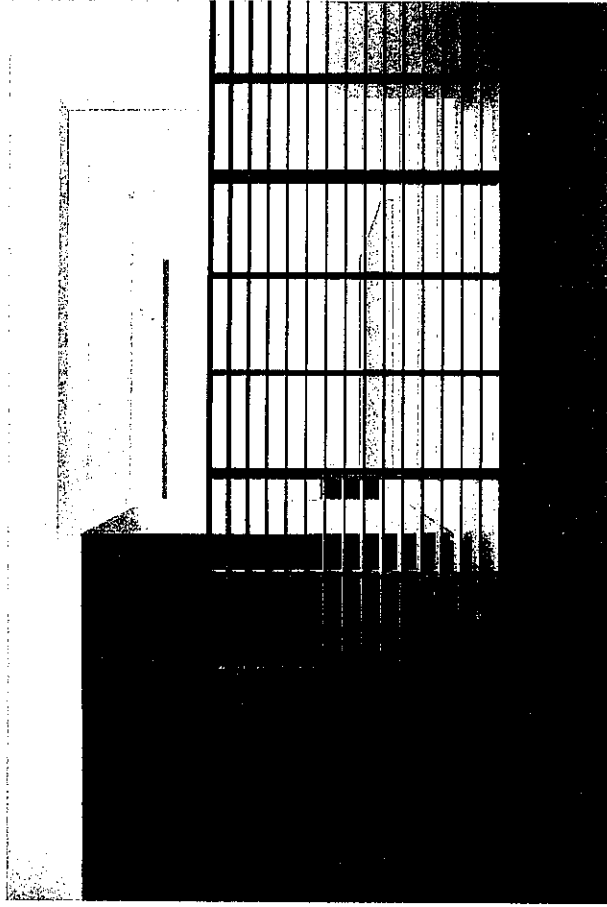
2 In particular, Duchamp used elements from popular discourse—by authors such as Henri Poincaré—about *N*-dimensional geometry and the fourth dimension.

Liam Gillick

Three perspectives and a short scenario

Exhibition view: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2008

Photo: Bob Goedewaagen



judgments. The aim was to open up the work of art, to extricate it from reductive forms of visibility and textuality—from reductive visibility produced through prescriptive writing—by advancing through the “illusory labels of language” in order to get well and truly lost.³ In the last two decades, however, discourse production by artists has taken on a much more pragmatic character, as the discursive impulse has increasingly revealed itself to be an economic imperative. Survival on the international circuit demands statements that function as readymade memes, not circuitous sentences undermining their own status.

In a 2008 lecture on the discursive in contemporary art, Gillick paraphrased Maurizio Lazzarato's definition of *immaterial labor*, terming it “the set of factors that produce the informational and cultural content of a commodity,” and went on to claim, “The discursive is a negotiation, and demonstration of Immaterial Labour for other ends.” Gillick goes so far as to say that “the discursive makes use of theories of Immaterial Labour in order to escape simplistic understandings of production within a cultural context.”⁴ Referring to a scene from a 1974 film by the Medvedkin Group in which long-haired activists try to coax migrant workers into protest by performing in front of them as a traditional brass band, Gillick makes the pertinent suggestion that “at the heart of the discursive is a re-examination of ‘the day before’ as a model of understanding how to act and what to present. It tries to get the point *just before* the

only option was to play the tuba to the workers.”⁵ Indeed, many of the most fruitful discursive interventions since the 1960s—and before—are aimed at retrieving the anachronistic potential of that most archaic of eras, the recent past. Since 2004, and in particular since his 2005 show at the Palais de Tokyo entitled *Texte court sur la possibilité de créer une économie de l'équivalence* [A short text on the possibility of creating an economy of equivalence], Gillick's work has been informed by the aforementioned narrative about the unemployed workers of a closed-down factory transforming this former site of production into one of “postproduction,” now “constructing ideas rather than cars.”⁶

The basis for this is *Construcción de uno – Construction of one*, an evolving text that derives from Brazilian research into Scandinavian car production. In 2005, *Construcción de uno* was announced as a book that Gillick was writing; three years later, it had morphed into a “constantly reworked ‘potential text.’”⁷ Giving *Construcción de uno* the status of a “potential text” may have the function of keeping an open perspective, of refusing to let thought ossify. But is this not also a refusal to take the risk of precise articulation, without which thinking tends to become a somewhat nebulous group of pet notions? Is Gillick's strategy the consequence of a positive characteristic of artistic discourse, namely its freedom from disciplinary, academic constraints, or has this freedom itself become a mere alibi for the production of texts that are so much advertising copy for the real thing—for exclusive and valuable objects?

Plains of Abstraction

A short text on the possibility of creating an economy of equivalence included colored, zigzagging steel constructions, suggestive of the abstracted outlines of hills, with the title *The view constructed by the factory after it stopped producing cars* (2005), as well as a group of structures resembling steel cages with colored Plexiglas bars bearing the title *A diagram of the factory once the former workers had cut extra windows in the walls* (2004/2005). Works from a 2008 exhibition at Casey Kaplan Gallery continue the strategy of combining suggestive titles with structures that recall

3 Robert Smithson, “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art” (1968), in Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley/Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996), 78.

4 Liam Gillick, *Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three*, Hermes Lecture 2008 (Den Bosch: Hermes Lecture Foundation, 2008), 15. For Lazzarato's text, “Immaterial Labor,” see <http://www.generation-online.org/c/feimmateriallabour3.htm>.

5 Liam Gillick, *A short text on the possibilities of creating an economy of equivalence* (2004), http://www.airdeparis.com/liam/2005/pdt/liam_gillick.htm.

6 Ibid., and the press release for Gillick's exhibition, *The state itself becomes a super whatnot* at Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York, May 8 to June 14, 2008. http://www.caseykaplangallery.com/press_release/2008/liam_gillick_2008.pdf.

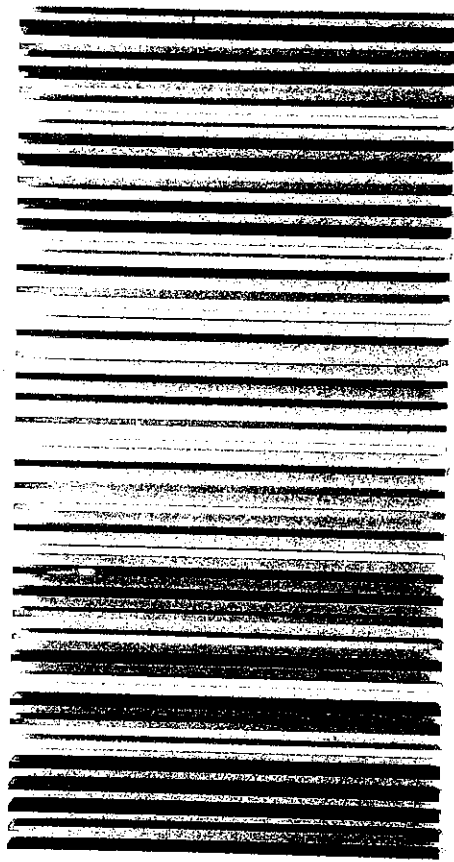
the minimalism of corporate décor and design, including the wall relief *Between Kahnar and Udevalla* (2008) as well as the freestanding aluminum and Plexiglas constructions *Sometimes they worked in groups of three, Status following closure and Rescinded production* (all 2008). The forms of such works have at best a highly indirect relation with Gillick's post-Fordist myth, insofar as they hark back to the industrial design and the modernist and Minimalist art of the 1960s, the era of nascent post-Fordism. In referring to sculptural forms from the 1960s in relation to the economic transformations taking place, Gillick effectively raises doubts about the efficacy of formal abstraction to signify; after all, is post-Fordism at its core not a matter of conceptual rather than formal abstraction?

For Adorno, whose late-modernist *Aesthetic Theory* was written during these years, modern art is precisely about *resistance to the concept*; artistic modernism amounted to a fight for the “non-identical” in the face of the concept, a resistance to conceptual knowledge. Hegel posited that the idea represents the *identity* of the real and the ideal; in the idea, the concept and its object are one. Adorno was to examine the remainder of this operation—the refusal of the concept, left behind by philosophical abstraction. Here, art becomes crucial because it operates not conceptually but with a latently “magical” procedure, one harking back to the dawn of culture: it is fundamentally mimetic, a projection of subjectivity onto something, rather than an analysis of it. As such, “Art is the correction of conceptual knowledge.”⁸ However, if art is to be successful, it cannot engage in an abstract negation of reason; rather, it must absorb the non-identical other of reason into its “immanent necessity,” that is, into its mimetic appropriation of rational procedures. Art, in other words, is “rationality that has become self-critical without thereby leaving the domain of reason.”⁹ In this respect, Mondrian is a most Adornian artist, absorbing the forms of industrial

8 Theodor W. Adorno, “Ästhetische Theorie,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 173. English-Adorno quotations in the texts are the author's translations.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Liam Gillick
Between Kahnar and Udevalla, 2008
 Powder-coated aluminum
 Installed dimensions: 200 cm × 393 cm × 15 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York



capitalism while adhering to the archaic medium of easel painting, and arguing that his art stands “between the absolute-abstract and the natural or the concrete-real. It is not as abstract as abstract thought and not as real as tangible reality. It is aesthetically living plastic representation: the visual expression within which each opposite is transformed into the other.”¹⁰ His abstract art is thus somewhat conservative, shying away from ultimate abstraction; while Mondrian wrote copiously, his works are not conceptual or discursive. Insofar as his works are writings, they are, as Adorno put it, “hieroglyphic writings whose code was lost.”¹¹

The Conceptual art that emerged in the last years of Adorno’s life seems to be at the furthest possible remove from his aesthetic thinking. In designating language as the master medium of abstraction, Conceptualism mirrored an economic regime in which abstract thought itself became increasingly operative and concrete; “abstract thought,” as Paolo Virno put it, “has become a pillar of social production.”¹² In the process, the status of formal abstraction radically changed. From being a manifestation of sensuous thinking, form became design—that is to say, an implementation of a concept by coding or programming surfaces rather than an extraction of form through a subjective

engagement with a surface’s properties. This “becoming-design” can be seen over a wide range of 1960s art with increasing explicitness, from Color Field painting via Minimalism to Conceptual art. Forms became logo-like, stamped on a surface or constructed in three dimensions; Caroline Jones has pointed out the similarity of, for instance, some of Frank Stella’s work from the 1960s to corporate logos of the era.¹³

This too can be seen as indicative of art’s “conceptual turn” in the 1960s; next to the linguistic Conceptualism of a Joseph Kosuth, we have Sol LeWitt’s formalist conceptualism, or conceptual formalism, which employs concepts that may be as much post- as pre-linguistic.

When LeWitt characterized the idea as a “machine that makes the art,” he effectively acknowledged that forms were now instantiations of a concept, just as much as the designed commodities of the 1960s instantiated a corporate brand.¹⁴ Abstract thought thus reveals its complicity with that other fundamental form of abstraction: exchange.¹⁵ Adorno already argued against the fetishization of “scientific reflection” as the sole agent of abstraction; yet abstraction also takes place in the “universal implementation” of exchange, which abstracts from the qualitative aspects of the relation between producer and consumer, reducing all relationships to interchangeable links of exchange. In the decoding of ancient structures, monetary and conceptual abstraction go hand in hand; while both predate capitalism by a long time, what is crucial is that only capitalism allows for a truly “universal implementation” of the exchange system, doing away with traditional limitations, transforming God-given hierarchy into mobile capital. In the process, conceptual abstraction moves from philosophical notions to the mathematical abstractions of modern science, and from the blueprints of industrial technology to the programs of the digital age; abstraction thus becomes increasingly operative and transformative. Perhaps history can be graphically represented as the merger of different lines of abstraction; in advanced capitalism, concept and coinage reveal their historical complicity. In becoming software that can be sold over and over again, the concept becomes currency.

10 Piet Mondrian, “The New Plastic in Painting” (*De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst*, 1917), in *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans. Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James (New York: Da Capo, 1993), 36.

11 Adorno, 189.

12 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson, (Los Angeles/New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 63.

13 For conceptual art, see Camiel van Winkel, “Information and Visualisation. The Artist as Designer,” in *The Regime of Visibility*, (Rotterdam: NAU Uitgevers, 2005), 107–171.

14 For an analysis of LeWitt’s linking of idea and machine in his “Paraglyphs on Conceptual Art” (1967) within the context of the post-Fordist economy, see Sabeth Buchmann, *Denken gegen das Denken: Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica*, (Berlin: b_books/Reihe PoLYpaN, 2007), 48–54.

15 Theodor W. Adorno, “Gesellschaft” (1965), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8: *Soziologische Schriften I*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1972), 13. See also Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, (London/New York: Verso, 2007), 35–42.

Liam Gillick
Everything Good Goes, 2008
Digital video for projection, 18 min.
Installation view: The Vincent Award 2008, Stedelijk Museum CS, Amsterdam
Photo: Stedelijk Museum/Gert Jan van Rooij.



In the hyper-abstractness of conceptual capitalism, the logos triumphs over the non-identical refuse that is sensory experience.

That Gillick's objects and installations reflect the becoming-design of abstraction does not, of course, mean that his work is design, merely that it reflects, and reflects on, the status of design as the current paradigm of *Gestaltung* through its use of post-painterly design elements and its coded implementations of a concept that can be reused and adapted to different situations.¹⁶ In its pragmatic referentialism, Gillick's art completes abstract art's trajectory of "conceptualization." If abstraction could originally be characterized, in Adornian terms, as mimetically absorbing elements from capitalist technology with the aim of *subverting* the mimetic in a culture where it is an anachronism, this mimesis has increasingly become so complete that it can actually be seen as a celebration of capitalist technology and its purposive rationality. If this transformation became undeniable by the 1960s, the most convincing late-modernist and Minimalist art still managed to infuse its quasi-design forms with a logic of its own, a logic that is excessive in its rigor. Seen as an object, Gillick's *Rescinded production* is little more than a normalized, generic echo of 1960s practices, lacking both Judd's nominalist precision and the suggestiveness of LeWitt's quasi-automatized permutations; LeWitt's formalist concepts generated exhaustive permutations of formal possibilities that are suggestive of the changing circumstances of production in the 1960s in ways that elude Gillick's branded shapes. Ironically, this could be said to make Gillick's art rather Adornian in character; after all, for Adorno the shapes of modern art were *pseudo-signs* that were marked precisely by the failure—or refusal—to fully signify. However, Gillick's objects and installations are hardly allowed to develop an aesthetics of poverty on their own terms, for they are constantly presented as quasi-illustrations of his discourse, or as props in his post-Fordist drama.

16

An artist once quipped that "art people" often doubt the artistic value of Gillick's work but concede that it might be good design, while "design people" know it to be bad design and therefore surmise that it must be good art.

In a conversation, an older colleague whose "artistic socialization"—as they say in Germany—took place in the context of 1960s formalism, admitted to a regrettable lack of interest in Gillick's discourse while expressing an appreciation for the "aesthetic dimension" of his work, an aesthetic dimension he linked to British art of the 1960s. While there are no doubt similarities—even "influences," so dreaded by advanced contemporary discourse—it seems to me a misunderstanding to equate the look of Gillick's work with its "aesthetic dimension."

Suppose that, in this age of discourse production, we were interested in the aesthetic—not for the sake of some academic specialism or for defining a narrow canon of what constitutes "authentic" art, but because we consider the essentially aesthetic question, first delineated around 1800, of the relation of reason and its other, of abstract thought and the world of the senses, more crucial (and more political) than ever in the age of "immaterial" labor. Would it not be precisely in Gillick's discourse and in its relation with his forms that we would find such a questioning? And yet, does not the narrative of the factory become something of a reductive cartoon, a line drawing traced over and over again? What does it mean to tell and retell the tale of the production of cars being replaced by the production of ideas? Is there difference in these repetitions?

Factory Life

In Gillick's 2008 video *Everything Good Goes*, architectural forms appear on a flat screen in a stylishly minimalist office in response to the Mac mouse being manipulated by an operator whose identity remains concealed—in spite of the mirror behind the monitor. On the soundtrack, there are some semi-audible phone messages on contemporary labor. We read in a separate information sheet that the building on the screen is a model of the Salumi meat factory in Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's 1972 film *Tout va bien*; of this film's ambitious attempt to analyze and criticize concrete abstraction in a neo-Brechtian way, next to nothing remains. Everything in the video suggests that material production and conflicts over labor conditions are a thing of the (Fordist)

past, a laughable anachronism that barely deserves a passing thought over a latte macchiato. What is carefully left out of the composition is anything that could complicate the image of disembodied sign production; the production of the machinery being used, the hidden world of server centers and their ecological implications, the potential execution of the design on the screen, its implications outside a rarified environment where everything is perceived in terms of fashion, of the right signifier at the right time.

Of course one might argue that it is the soundtrack that has the function of going beyond the appearances of “dematerialized” sign production. To a certain extent it does function in this way, but in such an abstract and suggestive way that it does little to dispel the mystique. Not only is the voice-over none too clearly audible and tends to become static noise from which occasional sound bites emerge (“a zombie with an agency”), but the script itself is non-linear, written like late-night rambling rather than coherent discourse. But is this seeming shortcoming not exactly part of the script’s quality? One objection sometimes voiced to Gillick’s practice is that his discourse does not hold up to scrutiny; that it is a ramshackle montage of superficially understood sources. To this one could respond that something similar is true of Dan Graham’s and Robert Smithson’s writings, and that it is precisely their *failure* to become properly discursive that qualifies them as aesthetic. In Graham’s writings, however, the sabotage and self-cancellation of discourse seems to be enacted rather more self-consciously than in Gillick’s writings, which always seem to court the danger of ending up as *simulation* rather than as a *disturbance* of discourse—the latter being the effect of the most successful of Graham’s or Smithson’s excursions into the “illusory babels of language.”

In the text by Maurizio Lazzarato paraphrased by Gillick, the first form of immaterial labor is characterized as the “informational content” of the commodity, while the second involves the mediation of that commodity by “activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms and, more strategically, public opinion.”

Liam Gillick

theatrespacewhatever, signage system, 2008

Exhibition view: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2008
Powder-coated, water-cut aluminum

Courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York,
with thanks to José Noé Suro, Guadalajara, Mexico

Photo: David Heald © The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

theatrespacewhatever
theatrespacewhatever



If the "orthodox" Conceptualism of a Joseph Kosuth, with its emphasis on "ideas" that can be realized in a variety of seemingly indifferent forms and media, seems to be a Platonist mystification of the role of "informational content" in the post-Fordist economy, the practices of artists such as Broodthaers, Graham or Smithson put the emphasis not on the program, on the idea-turned-code, but on the other strategic kind of immaterial labor. In opposition to Kosuth's Platonist "art as idea," artists such as Smithson present art as discourse, as infinite mediation and reflection—discursive (or meta-discursive) art rather than Conceptual art. But if Gillick can be placed in this lineage, it can nonetheless be asked whether a kind of Platonism does not return in his discourse.

In Fredric Jameson's words, the public sphere constantly demands a traffic in tokens that it terms "ideas" but which are really "idea objects," commodified fragments of theory—a production of ideas along the lines of Fordist car production.¹⁷ Some forms of discourse offer less resistance to this mechanism than others; and are some not in fact tailor-made for this process? Can the three-dimensional textual fragments exhibited recently by Gillick in the Guggenheim exhibition *theyspacerothatever* not be read as accidental illustrations of Jameson's point? Do they not seem singularly unwilling to function in any other way than as abstract advertising slogans for Gillick's practice?

It may seem willfully perverse and deliberately anachronistic to raise such questions—which may or may not be rhetorical—in the context of a publication on Liam Gillick. In contemporary art magazines, and even more in catalogues and related publications (even if they are termed "critical readers"), discourse is likely to be positive and celebratory; criticism tends to become highbrow copywriting. When debates do take place, they are often thinly disguised jockeying for positions and

symbolic capital. Boris Groys has suggested that the only effective contemporary form of judgment lies in the decision whether to write or not to write about an artist, since any published criticism is likely to be neutralized as proof that the artist's work is "controversial" and therefore important or relevant—and if it is embedded in a publication sanctioned by the artist, its role is compromised from the outset.¹⁸ However, to join the conspiracy of silence seems the greatest compromise of all. Any text—or object—with discursive qualities is a message in a bottle, a missive to unknown addressees; potential discourse waiting to be actualized in the form of a response, a rebuttal, an appropriation or *détournement*, a sounding of its use value. Perhaps an art criticism that tries to think *with* as well as against and beyond its immediate object can still develop an efficacy of its own, sometimes.

17 Fredric Jameson, "Introduction: On Not Giving Interviews," in *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 6.

18 Boris Groys, conversation with the author; Groys calls this a transition from a "plus/minus" form of judgment to a "zero/one" form of judgment.