

WATCHING A FILM THAT IS NOT TAKING PLACE

Liam Gillick interviewed by Søren Grammel
1999, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main
Published on fkv.de (deleted)

In the end it is very difficult to turn up as a DJ and making cake... what I like about this position of the artist is that you are going to be a DJ and come up with a cake
(Liam Gillick)

Søren Grammel: Let us talk about your recent show »David« at the Frankfurter Kunstverein. It can be seen as a series of scenarios providing uncomplete information for a possible film. What is interesting for you about this idea of the exhibition as a filmset?

Liam Gillick: I am interested in the idea of an exhibition also being a place where the visitor is occupying a very specific type of location which is very different from the idea that the visitor is completing the exhibition.

It is more that the place is activated somehow by people in the sense that the work is not necessarily working best as objects for consideration. It is sometimes good as a backdrop.

S: And why in particular film and not e.g. theater or another format?

L: I like the way how peoples perception is changed after the developments of cinema and tv-seeing the image of yourself doing what you are doing. So, partly, it is about using an exhibition as a very basic framework to exaggerate some of these feelings a little bit. One simple example is, I have always been interested in the way that children-when they play sport-commentate on their actions: when you watch boys and girls, playing football, they might talk like: »he is running down the line, the ball comes and go go go«-and they did a self-commentary.

S: But you are not interested in making an actual film, are you?

L: I do not think, the exhibition would work as a good filmset. But I also do not think it would be enough to see it as a series

of autonomous artworks either. I feel very strongly about artists should try and find a kind of grey area-which is hard to fulfill with any other objects. So, it is very much by default. It is like trying to find wasted work that are not this and not that... but without being purely aesthetic or purely formalist either. And for me, it is this world of this kind of setting or decor that I am really interested in.

S: Did you think of »David« in relation to an existing film-figure?

L: Kubrick wanted to always make a Science Fiction after »2001«, but he never did it. One of the problems was, he could not find an ending. But he did note, that the main character would be called David. He wanted to make a film after seeing E.T.-this kind of successful Science Fiction à la Star Wars, but he wanted to make a Science Fiction that was human-based, that was a human story.

And in fact the story of David is a little bit Günther Grass-in the sense that it is about a boy who does not get older because he is a robot.

S: ... with »Grass« you refer to the novel »Blechtrommel« in which the main figure decides to stop growing ...

L: Yes, however, »David« is a replacement for a child-for a family that lost their daughter. All we know about this film is that they did not know how to end it, how to complete it. So, I was interested to use this title for a number of reasons: Firstly, to change the type of titling that you might give for an exhibition-like for example »Liam Gillick: New Work«. It is a concede, a game. Secondly, to act as a corrective against what I have been doing in the last two or three years which has tended to have titling which refers to social structures.

S: ... and thirdly?

L: Thirdly, it is a rather loaded name-it has some associations. And it is also a name which-as far as I can tell-is common for us in European language; it does not change in the spelling in English, in German, in French.

I am interested in reversal-processes, where you are not using

art to tell a story but you are using it to play with certain conditions. Within my work it is possible to apply new conditions to the same thinking and see what happens and see how the things are shifting. This kind of introduction or uncomplete character is quite useful: it replaces the artist with another character who is playing in this space ... this sounds very french.

S: What role plays the family-component in the whole show: the overweight of Davids memory in concern to his mother or the stepdaughters' room, which is existing in Davids memory »just as a whole in the wall«?

L: Well, it does not exist-literally. Nothing of the story is really literalised or made literal. None of it is illustrated. But, I am interested in this question of memory and family. I am always interested in reclaiming areas which seem to be complete or fully occupied-or the territory of one particular group of people.

The subplot of the show is very similar to that in the past: I have always tried to claim a territory or to reclaim it away from the way it is normally expressed.

I think, to introduce this sort of bad ending of the story which has some very simple family elements is allowing me to play with an area or territory that I do not have the equipment to play with. In this way, you could say, that is an analogy between my position and this kind of Kubrick reference in the sense that he is constantly attacked of being incapable of showing effective human relations.

S: Well, »incapable of showing« or maybe just consciously disrupting in order to create another potential space beyond narrative?

L: This side of it is something I am quite interested in: the slightly mannered presentation of a decor or a potential site for playing something out which seems to be missing certain key-psychological markers or indicators which would otherwise help you to negotiate everything.

S: Do you then think it is important, that the visitors know about the narrative in the whole piece in general?

L: Not really. I have realised that to a certain extent the way things are visualised is always a result that depends upon the kind of thinking that is gone on. I think it is very hard to hide-the hardest thing to do is to hide the initial impulse to do something. It is interesting that certain people you meet have certain ideas or beliefs or political ideas or whatever-it is often very hard for them to hide it in the formal realisation of the artwork.

S: Please, deepen this thought ...

L: There is something inherently conservative within what they end up doing even if theoretically it would be abstract and open-yes, I can say, I try my hardest but it is very hard for me to hide some of these things.

But, if people go and look at the rooms purely as an arrangement of objects in a space to find for art, they will find that certain things are undermined: they do not get a complete indication of an artistic sort of act ... they get a series of markers or provisional structures. People can tell that even if the way they tell it is not clear or is like: »what is the story or I can not read this or I have no access«.

S: I can see this moment of undermining quite clearly in the photo-series »location shots«. What makes them being just location shots? Or, why do you want them to be location shots only?

L: I am quite involved in a level of delusion in my work in the sense that I feel this old post-enlightenment idea that the thing for an artist to do is to take on certain tasks without being given a cultural permission to do it.

In the past, I worked a little like an architect, a little like a designer. I still find this displacement activity useful. To intend to go to make an artistic commentary upon the look of a particular architecture I find very boring-but to put myself in the role of thinking: can I return to this place and make an effective search for a new form of film is more interesting to me, because I do not have a film to make... I am temporarily playing out a game.

S: You mean in the sense of playing with different roles?

L: Yes, I could say, these photos are not so different from a certain type of art which is dealing with a clear idea of the built world-but to me there is an intentional difference: I was not going there to make a record of this place-I displaced my own sense of what I am doing and I go there with the idea: »could this place be used-can you still use it?« And in the meantime, you come up with another kind of result ... it is a bit like when you are painting a wall in a house, and you have an old newspaper on the floor to cover the floor-the old newspaper suddenly becomes more interesting than painting the wall, even if, when you were reading it before, it was uninteresting.

S: How can you apply this moment as a constitutive part of your work?

L: There is a very important key to understand about my work: one is distraction. So, following this distracted line, saying o.k.: »I am supposed to be doing an exhibition for the Frankfurter Kunstverein-and what I do is I end up going to South London to make a film, a location shoot for the film«. I quite like this group of people-I am not shure if it has got anything to do with freedom-who are allowed in this society to do this kind of distracted displacement exercise. Because in the end, if you are a DJ, you can do it within the form of the music-you can have different forms and different combinations and different ways to present it. But in the end it is very difficult to turn up as a DJ and making cake... what I like about this position of the artist is that you are going to be a DJ and come up with a cake.

S: In this way, you somehow answered my next question: why you are not interested in making a 'real' film...?

L: Yes, I am not interested in the idea of an artist to be someone who purely replaces the activity of someone else. I am not interested in being an artist making film. What I like about this idea of an artist is, that you can come up with something totally different...

S: So, literally you are displacing the co-ordinates of your own production by introducing them into a different conditional framework?

L: Yes, it would not be interesting to me to create a film-set as such, but I find it interesting to use a certain kind of mentality in order to create a slightly different quality of artwork: if I am interested in film at all, I am interested in pre-production and post-production, not in actually making a film.

S: You are pushing things into this area where they always slightly going between...

L: Yes, I am interested in the process of deciding how and what you do afterwards when you reprocessing it, replaying it. And that kind of mentality produces a particular kind of half-object that can function quite well within my context as an object that has significance, but not because it has an 'auratic' value like the kind of essentialist value as such...but also not because of a Duchampian application of meaning to it and not because it is inherently art-like either... but it has a bit of all of those things.

S: What meaning does the notion of »applied« have for your work?

L: I think it is important for an artist to apply work, even if it is undermining or making some other things a bit weaker: the difference between my work and pure formalist or late modern minimal art is that I am prepared to apply my work. I have always liked using this word »prototype«, »provisional«. I like to see this conference space (Prototype Design for Conference Room) as a prototype conference room. The fact that we use it is another thing-but it is only a prototype.

S: Is the division between applied art and fine art still of any relevance, today?

L: I am interested in this division. The subplot to this is purely personal, it is, that my mother was a designer. From this period before cheap photographic reproduction, when you used this highly trained person to do all the things we now do on the computers. So, she would be illustrating and designing by hand and lay out by hand. I found this process of applied thinking very interesting.

S: But won't the conference room be much more a part of the whole show when the actual congress is over-I mean, in a sculptural sense?

L: Well, this is the thing I am not so happy about. I rather prefer when it is being used as a prototype conference room-I am not so happy when people think I created a theatrical space where you can play out the idea of conference basically. This was not an attempt to find a sign for a conference room, it was the answer to a request to come up with a solution for the conference at the weekend. I could have done something that looks like a continuation of the exhibition purely-I could have forced the conference to take place in a room full of things which were apparently more a kind of artwork-but it is still the most problematic part...

S: Well, yes and no, on the one hand something seems to fall apart but on the other you then have this Kubrick-joke by Matthew Modine on the wall, designed by Markus Weisbeck...

L: ... exactly, it is where you get a more literal side of this little Kubrick-game. I think this joke about Kubrick would be a very bad artwork but it is quite good as a thing on a wall of a conference room. As long as people use it like this, it is o.k.

S: Nicolaus (Schafhausen) introduced the conference with this idea, that all the participants of the conference would now be a part of your artwork...

L: I never think that anybody is part of any artwork. I mean, they are sitting on some boxes. I am being pedantic but they are not part of it: they are having a relation with it, a temporary relationship. And it is interesting that people know what to do in the room automatically. I never told them that they have to sit on the boxes.

S: The plexiglas ceiling on the second floor looks quite-sorry to say this-'funky' to me-like the whole show has got a bit of a disco-character to me in some ways: is there a slight change in the attitude of your work going on?

L: The work I did at documenta in 1997 felt completely different, because there were no artificial lighting. The

curatorial desire was to emphasise the materiality of the object: the platform that was hanging in this kind of quasi-autonomous space in a corridor between one set of thinking and another set of thinking. They wanted to emphasise the material-quality in itself.

Now, for this exhibition, I wanted to test and correct some of those ideas. For the first visitor that might not be clear, but they will certainly sense that there is something a little bit destabilised. I thought here it would be interesting to show a difference. There is an inherently different quality. It is much lighter-literally and metaphorically lighter-than the structures which I have made before.

S: Do you refer to the big platform?

L: Yes, it is very much a corrective to the work that I have done before. I liked the idea to show it with light, which is not the same thing. So, this is a very clear reference. And I am using the word »Resignation«, because this is all about working around the research for this book »The Big Conference-Center«, which is a search for who controls the near future in a post-utopian context. I made work which tried to indicate some of these middle-positions like resignation strategy, compromise, negotiation-so, I use titling that was inherently non-fundamental, it was flexible.

S: So, how then would you describe the relation between the formal placements that you make, and this filmset-concept in the end?

L: I still believe it is important to try and play with this idea of a retinal experience as a particularly different one to a narrative experience, and I still believe that we are using different parts of the brain, when we are writing a critical analysis or when we are making an arrangement of physical objects. It is trying to keep a kind of binal line between working within the parametres of a non-narative structure but without using it.