



## Literally No Place

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The brightly coloured translucent screens and platforms of Liam Gillick's Whitechapel Gallery exhibition, *The Wood Way*, appear to offer a corporatised version of the modernist architectural utopia in which the transparency of glass would bring light, health, mental clarity, openness and nature itself into the gloomy domestic interior. If that vision failed, it was, as Ernst Bloch, strikingly puts it, because the plate glass window of the 1930s did not look out on anything delightful but rather on the capitalist world and fascism:

The wide window filled with a noisy outside world needs an outside full of attractive strangers, not full of Nazis; the glass door down to the floor really presupposes sunshine that looks in and comes in, not the Gestapo.<sup>1</sup>

Gillick makes objects and exhibitions generated from short books that he writes, and *The Wood Way* was elaborated by using the text of *Literally No Place*, both meditating on the condition of utopian thinking and construction in what appears to be a definitively post-utopian time.

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes/ Frank Mecklenburg, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1988, p. 187.

*Literally No Place* has a strange, repetitive, looping style which seems less the product of a human mind thinking through a narrative or an argument, than the machine processing of a set of statements that are cut, copied and pasted, with the same or almost the same form of words being called into place over and over. Sentences begin and end abruptly, incomplete. In this way, the book echoes the objects and exhibitions which are drafted and swiftly, repeatedly revised on computer. The textual material itself, even when it deals with highly emotive subjects (such as children coming to harm) is detached and bureaucratic, dwelling on how environments affect human behaviour and vice versa but not from a point of view that privileges human experience. It shares this quality with Manuel de Landa's book on machine intelligence, written as if from the future by the then dominant machines.<sup>2</sup>

The wide distance between Gillick's post-utopian thinking and the utopian past is illustrated by the posting at the head of some sections of *Literally No Place* certain antique quotes: here is a nineteenth-century magistrate cited by Marx in *Capital*:

Children of nine or ten are dragged from their squalid beds at two, three or four o'clock in the morning, and compelled to work for a bare subsistence until ten, eleven or twelve at night, their limbs wearing away, their frames dwindling, their faces whitening, and their humanity absolutely sinking into a stone-like torpor, utterly horrible to contemplate.

And here Gillick's weird prose on the way that a landscape scattered with dangerous mine shafts affects the behaviour of its inhabitants:

So the urban child and his cousin, the country child, whenever they are involved in any act that might still be described as homogenising or amplification of the disputes and the unspoken arguments between the people in the bungalows placed around the Neolithic burial mound, have the potential to fall down mine shafts.

It is not, of course, that the first statement could not be accurately applied to many places in the world today but rather that its simple identification with its subjects may appear in some circles overly naïve, humanist or utopian. The second is a remarkably distant way of saying how potential danger affects emotions and discourse. It emulates management-speak with its technical euphemisms and passive constructions, deployed, for example, by bosses who want to sack people or generals who want to kill them.

If the prose keeps recalling fragmentary subroutines, the book ends where it begins, with the near-repetition of a passage describing a group of wanderers in the wilderness, and their long search for something, probably inside themselves. Following the progress of the book in which various members of the group have recounted stories, little seems to have altered. This circularity is not dialectical for there are no clear oppositions that resolve or synthesise themselves in a higher state, but rather there is the repetitious and always provisional negotiation of uncertain middle ground. As with the title of *The Wood Way*, this circular movement may be related to Heidegger's meditations on walking in the forest—that if a walker starts and finishes in the same clearing, it is for them no longer the same clearing. The passages describing the wanderers' situation at start and finish of

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<sup>2</sup> Manuel De Landa, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*, Zone Books, New York 1991.

*Literally No Place* do contain significant differences: past tense switches to future, and the wanderers have gained a new clarity, allowing their previously arced path to remain straight, at least for another day. So perhaps this text does hold out some very modest hope for improvement in the examination and discussion of post-utopian situations, though such a judgement can never be arrived at using universal criteria, but must always be tested against local conditions and the complex sums of individual desires.

Gillick's work has long been concerned with the bureaucratic and technocratic middle ground within which most decisions—are made in the developed world, at least—by politicians, business people, planners and administrators. Insistently, he asks an important question: how is the near future controlled in a post-utopian situation? Lacking the old absolute goals of redemption, equality or a cleansed and harmonious nation, what implicit vision drives the future onwards? In making objects, Gillick takes corporate material—colours, logos, typefaces—and sets them into play. On the face of it, this is to take the apparatus of instrumental bureaucracy and throw it into contention with its opposite, playful aesthetics. Yet that is not quite the task undertaken, for while the bottom line of commercial and political display is an instrumental result (the digital 0/1 of buying or not buying, or of a tick in the candidate's box), the means to that end, routed through human consciousness and control of the environment, are saturated with ideology and the aesthetic.

In making work that seeks less to document than to exemplify the ideological and aesthetic action of bureaucracy on the world, the danger is that the art becomes indistinguishable from its subject. Gillick has to contend not only with this peril but with the baggage that goes with making and displaying works of art in galleries. The latter problem is dealt with in part by the tactics of detachment, which are as much a part of his bewildering installations as it is of the prose of *Literally No Place*. It is hard to imagine that either are the products of a single consciousness. They seem neither expressive nor ironic (a cause for considerable relief in the habitual gallery-goer). They appear to claim no special status as art objects, and Gillick has commented that art becomes a problem when people assume that it carries more inherent significance than other complex structures in the world.<sup>3</sup> Yet these moves, salutary in themselves, heighten the first danger.

It is dealt with in a number of ways. The most salient is a play with near-past and near-future, using a device that draws upon the thinking of Walter Benjamin who similarly looked to recently outmoded and unfashionable commercial structures, the shopping arcades of Paris, for ideal architectural visions that prefigured the impending modernist and communist utopia.<sup>4</sup> Gillick looks back to commercial and administrative structures of another as yet unrecuperated recent past, the 1970s, to make current ideological and aesthetic structures visible and strange.

Another way is in an attack on humanism: in *Literally No Place*, Gillick goes as far as to say that utopianism is a critique of humanistic thinking. Neither author/artist nor subject matter, as we have seen, are staged to permit emotional engagement or identification. Gillick's aesthetic play, while appearing to offer the chance for democratic participation, engagement and dialogue, often frustrates those expectations; with fixed arrangements of

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<sup>3</sup> Whitechapel Art Gallery, *Liam Gillick: The Wood Way*, London 2002, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass 1999.

tables and chairs that are awkward and unlikely to promote exchange, with a catalogue for an exhibition placed out of reach of the audience, with a fake manuscript of blank pages, and in general with arrangements that, despite their cheery corporate colours, seem alienating and rebarbative. Thus the function of bureaucracy, the inhuman management of human beings, is cunningly revealed. The gallery and the museum, ever more manifestly the servants of the corporations, are a salient place to stage that revelation, though the status of the works themselves—as an exemplification of that condition as much as a rejection of it—remain deeply ambivalent.

*Literally No Place* uses as one of its section headings a set of statements attributed to the Khmer Rouge leaders, an indication of one utopian vision among many that ended in cruelty and mass-murder. Previously, Gillick, stating that he is interested in the aesthetics of administrations that go disastrously wrong, has worked on material about Robert McNamara, the US Defense Secretary during much of the Vietnam war.<sup>5</sup> A creature of bureaucracy and the middle ground, and a brilliant technocrat who was a principal architect of the genocidal conduct of the war, McNamara sanitised and quantified the conflict in many government minds with his statistics of death. (The war directly produced the Khmer Rouge, who emerged as a radical response to the murderous and random bombing campaign that the conducted US against Cambodia.)<sup>6</sup> Gillick's work tends to step around what would appear to be the main event, showing films scripts not films and in *Literally No Place* being more interested in what goes on in greenrooms before and after the performance than in the performance itself; in fixing upon the apparently mundane figure of McNamara, the Eichmann of the US, there is a clear recognition of the darkest side of technocracy.

This reading of Gillick's work, and *Literally No Place* in particular, is in some sense set against its grain since he is an artist who offers possibilities rather than holds a position, and who wants his work to be 'in a constant flux between perception states, like a flickering sense of function, ideology and art.'<sup>7</sup> In this, unusually, he adopts conventional art-world tactics. Gillick's work has been highly successful internationally, and it is fair to ask what use the art world makes of it beyond its own internal logic. With *The Wood Way*, one use was indicated by the Whitechapel's director, Iwona Blazwick who claimed that Gillick:

... has created opportunities for us to meet, to reclaim the idea of discussion, consultation, renovation or delay—for us to become protagonists in modelling possible futures.<sup>8</sup>

It is the undefined 'us' in this statement that makes it contentious; Gillick's practice does seem to have offered just such opportunities for a small and elite band of collaborators, curators and even collectors (and wider groups of gallery-goers have used his spaces for various forms of play or discussion), yet the barriers to such participation seem high, and perhaps it is the very character of exclusiveness, of distinction and hierarchy that confers on his objects and texts the allure that brings to them their homogeneous cultural club.

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<sup>5</sup> Arnolfini, *Liam Gillick: Renovation Filter: Recent Past and Near Future*, Bristol 2000, p. 24; Liam Gillick, *McNamara Papers/ Erasmus and Ibuka! Realisations/ What If? Scenarios*, ed. Eric Troncy, Le Consortium, Dijon 1997.

<sup>6</sup> For the definitive account of US culpability in this, see William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*, Fontana, London 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Whitechapel Art Gallery, *Liam Gillick: The Wood Way*, London 2002, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Whitechapel Art Gallery, *Liam Gillick: The Wood Way*, London 2002, p. 5.