

LIAM GILLICK

Maybe it would
be better if
we worked in
groups of three?

HERMES LECTURE

Hermes Business Network & the Research Group of Visual Art,
AKV|St. Joost, Avans University

2008

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Introduction

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On 9 November 2008, two years after Jeff Wall held the successful first Hermes Lecture, the English artist Liam Gillick will present the second in this series of theoretical artists' lectures. The publication before you contains the text of the lecture as he will deliver it at the Province Hall in 's-Hertogenbosch.

Gillick, born in 1964 and now based in London and New York, evidently is from a different generation than Wall. Together with contemporaries such as Philippe Parreno, Pierre Huyghe, Rirkrit Tiravanija and others he was one of those who redefined the parameters of contemporary art in the 1990s. Following the more introvert artistic developments of the 1980s, which were characterised by a sometimes restrained, then again slightly dramatized insecurity about art's place in the world, the next decade witnessed a turn to an open (yet critical) orientation towards the social *Umfeld* of art. Interdisciplinarity, collaboration and a focus on process were the more notable aspects of this trend. Elaborating upon conceptual tendencies from the art of the 1960s and '70s, but with a much lighter touch, artists started to develop immaterial structures and processes whereby the creation of identifiable art objects was often only second or third on their list of priorities. Their work distinguished itself

by its sensitivity to context and its ability to switch between different institutional and social 'settings' in a sophisticated manner.

However varied these artistic tendencies were, they have collectively become known as 'relational aesthetics', a term coined by the French art critic N. Bourriaud. To the artists associated with this denominator it was frustrating to see their entire artistic endeavour reduced to a slogan from a flimsy book by a high-profile figure in the art world, whose success in terms of public relations made a bigger impression than the substance of his underlying argument.

Gillick's Hermes lecture may be regarded as an attempt to redefine the critical endeavour of his generation of artists—and thereby, indirectly, to redefine 'relational aesthetics', but this time in his own words and on his own terms. His lecture is not really concerned with an aesthetic model but rather with a *discursive model* of art practice—a model which he examines against the background of the post-war welfare state with its 'soft' organisational frameworks and collaborative structures. He also relates it to developments in Scandinavian car manufacturing of the 1970s, when teamwork and self-organisation were introduced and monotonous forms of assembly line work were abolished. His text may be regarded as a search for the 'cultural DNA' that these artistic and socio-economic phenomena possibly share.

The social aspects of the discursive art model are not without problems and risks, as Gillick stresses. In the context of the more shadowy sides of globalisation and the late capitalist economy, a preference for teamwork

and self-organisation in art could easily become tainted with nostalgia. Today's internationally operating network artist is in some respects nothing but a variation of the flexible employee who is prepared to answer emails and prepare presentations in the evenings and weekends too. Foremost though is the notion that the discursive art practice does not aim to smooth out problems—on the contrary. There is an affirmation of the dilemmas of the post-industrial economy without pretending to be able or to even want to solve them. 'In a discursive frame there is always an element that parallels the machinations of globalised capital; that is both its strength and its weakness.' The popular image of the artist as a customer-minded, service-oriented entrepreneur is certainly not an image supported by Gillick. In this respect at least, all differences aside, there is one parallel with Jeff Wall's argument of two years ago.

The objective of the biennial Hermes lecture is to give artists an opportunity to contribute on a high level to the theoretical discourse on the role of art and the position of the artist in today's society. The results of this are immediately 'fed back' into society; this in effect is the symbolic meaning of the collaboration between an art academy (AKV | St. Joost) and an entrepreneurs' network (Hermes).

On behalf of the Hermes Lecture Foundation we would like to thank all those individuals and organisations who have helped to make this lecture possible or have in any way contributed to its success: Liam Gillick

and Charles Esche (speaker and respondent, respectively); the members and the board of Hermes; the Recommending Committee of the Hermes Lecture; the management, staff and students at AKV|St. Joost; art centre Witte de With in Rotterdam; the Stedelijk Museum 's-Hertogenbosch; and the Province of Noord-Brabant.

Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three?

Liam Gillick

Some people are the motor of the event. Like an animator bringing characters to life. A character is drawn and through this process is free to behave in whatever way the animator wants it to. At our event you don't know exactly who animates who, but it is definitely taking place. Everyone is part of the same story, but with separate lives. They are in the style of recent Manga comics from Japan, where each character has a complex formulation that frequently changes from episode to episode or from story to story. Narratives are stretched and the stories have no specific end. The active people sometimes prefix a name with 'our', as in 'our Wallace' or 'our Hugh'. Each participant could be the son or the daughter of another person at the party. You never notice this but these relationships give some of the interactions between people an aim and a story.

There are also passive groups at the event. Maybe they are just visitors observing the party. They don't react much. They read a lot, talk a great deal and sometimes exchange pictures. In the same way that children make collections of things, the passive groups pass pictures around. It is not clear what they say to each other. Mumbling a bit. Conversations that are always difficult to overhear.

Philippe Parreno, 'Snow Dancing', 1995

Maybe we're trying to catch a moment, maybe an earlier moment, maybe it's a Volvo moment, 17th of June, 1974, when the view from the factory was of the trees and the way to work together was as a team and we know that the future is going to work out; everything is a trajectory as long as we can keep it this way and Ford don't buy the company.

A discursive model of praxis has developed within the critical art context over the last twenty years. It is the offspring of critical theory and improvised self-organised structures. It is the basis of art that involves the dissemination of information. It plays with social models and presents speculative constructs both within and beyond traditional gallery spaces. It is indebted to the reframing of relationships within conceptual art and required decentred and revised histories in order to evolve. In this text I am trying to test the validity of the discursive framework in the light of certain cultural developments since the fall of the Berlin Wall. There are some returns and absences that may affect our ability to continue as before.

The discursive is the key strategy employed by the most dynamic contemporary artists. Some of them use discursive strategies as a structural tool within their own work, others provide a contribution to a larger model of exchange. The discursive is what produces work but is also the produced work itself in the form of critical and impromptu exchanges.

The use of the word discursive includes the following considerations: first, a technical definition—the movement between subjects without or beyond order. Second—a set of discussions marked by their adherence to one or more notions of analytical reason. At no point does my use of the word imply coherence with the notion of discursive democracy as posited by Habermas and others, yet within the cultural terrain it has some connection to the idea of melding public deliberation while retaining the notion of individual practice within the 'group'.

The discursive is what differentiates certain collective models, not the other way around. The discursive framework emerges

from collaborative, collective or negotiated positions and is a mode of generating ideas and placing structures into the culture rather than producing varied forms of 'pure' expression or super-subjectivity. However, the discursive provides a space where all these approaches can be included. The rise of content-heavy discussions—seminars, symposia and discussion programmes—accompanying every serious art project over the last twenty years is very significant here. This phenomenon has given us a lot of time to excuse ourselves, to qualify ourselves and to provide an excess of specific positions that are not necessarily in sync with what is presented in the art spaces. These discussions are functional parallels that project in many directions. They are free zones of real production. Yet the discursive as a form of art practice in its own right is not reliant on these official parallel events. The discursive both goes beyond and absorbs such moments, turning them into something material and making them operate openly in opposition to official programming.

If we want to understand tendencies in art we have to look at the underlying structures. This is especially true when we consider discursive processes as the base of self-conscious art practices. Moreover we need to examine the notion of the discursive as a production model in its own right, alongside the production of objects for consideration or exchange, even though the focus of the discursive is less on what is produced than on the aims and structural efficacy of the cultural exercise.

The discursive leads to the proliferation of short texts and statements which both cover up and announce. The site of production today often exists within the text alone. The text is the key event, the key moment, the idea carrier and the project itself. The critical text is also the voice of the curatorial context. The critical text is now often produced by the person who is an implicated multiple personality within the cultural field. The anxiety of contemporary curating is not the cliché of the curator as mega-artist or neurotic traveller; it is the fear that the critical voice will have merged with the curatorial. A misunderstanding

emerges here in the reaction to what has been called 'relational aesthetics'. The implication is that this curatorial voice directs the critical flow. But the analysis of relational aesthetics got the moment of engagement the wrong way around. Critical self-consciousness was activated *before* the predictive text backtracked and set the scene. This is a common phenomenon of the discursive—the post-description of critical awareness, often in a straightforward form. The idea of a directed series of actions comes *after* the negotiated quality of the discursive. Moments of entry into the critical framework are muddled and inverted as a result of the struggle over the text having been transferred (as an anxiety) from the artist to the curator. Yet we still make assumptions about the root of critical potential emerging from the moment of identification of the flow rather than the flow itself.

All this is based on the understanding that statements are also events. Statements depend on the conditions in which they emerge and start to exist within a field of discourse. Statements as events are important within the discursive. Statements provide a 'location' from which to propose a physical potential that exists beyond the immediate art context. Putting a statement into play will create an event 'at some point'—or a series of events that are projected into the near future and can recuperate the recent past.

The discursive framework works in sync with theories of Immaterial Labour. The idea that prior to being manufactured a product must be sold is a dominant visible feature of certain developed late-modern art practices. The discursive is a negotiation and demonstration of Immaterial Labour for other ends. The study of Immaterial Labour accounts for the blurred factors that surround and produce commodity value. Immaterial Labour is the set of factors that produce the informational and cultural content of a commodity. The discursive makes use of theories of Immaterial Labour in order to escape simplistic understandings of production within a cultural context. Marx described the idea of identifying the true value of a chair in opposition to its com-

modity value. Philosophically it is one of the weakest parts of *Das Kapital*. His notion that a chair has an essential value prior to its commodification—a natural ‘chairness’ before being corrupted and commodified by capitalism—is at the heart of classic understandings of post-Duchampian art. It is exceeded and abandoned by the discursive in sync with recent critical texts on commodity value.

Like many artists I am interested in areas other than art. Therefore this text is not only about art but also about the structures that underlie the art context. I will be looking at the effect of modes of education and models of working life on cultural activity. My aim is to find a way to describe, map and analogize the processes that have actually been taking place under the surface of recent models of curating and artistic practice. I’m trying to get away from local and geographical anecdote and from ‘special event’ consciousness. At the same time, I want to look at echoes in the culture that might provide a clue to parallel productive techniques. There are specific models and precedents for discursive contemporary cultural production. I will talk about several of these models and precedents: the consensus model of post-war European social democracy, with its tendency towards a federal structure; various forms of group work and collective activity; and the experimental factory.

All of this is problematised by the idea of nostalgia for the group. Art provides a reflection of values, yet within the discursive this is inextricably related to role-playing as part of an educational legacy of co-operation. We are sometimes in thrall to structures from the recent past that were not supposed to be a model for anything. Some of the structures that we use, as cultural producers, echo a past that was part of a contingent set of accommodations and dynamic stresses within the post-war social project. And around this there remain old relationships of production that contradict complex theories of ‘post-industrial society’.

For those who grew up in post-war Europe notions of group work were embedded in educational systems. From pre-school ‘play-groups’ through the organising structures of management, with group discussion and team-work, we find a set of social models that carry complex implications for people who think they can create something using a related if semi-autonomous methodology. The discursive is wedded to this notion of group work, but also more generally to the idea of post-war social democracy. It is a product of its systems of education but at the same time subject to its critical potentials and collapses. The European context has surrounded itself with experiment machines in the culture. Both the success and the failure of the discursive framework are linked to various post-war phenomena connected with identity politics and post-colonial theory. At the same time the discursive is suspicious of and resistant to the idea of a key protagonist. Without key protagonists, however, it’s very hard to know what to do and when to do it. Still, the lack of leading voices does permit the discursive to evolve and include.

Maybe it is possible to explain the discursive cultural framework within a context of difference and collectivity—difference being the keyword that defines our time and collectivity being the thing that is so hard to achieve while frequently so longed for. We have to negotiate and recognize difference and collectivity simultaneously. It is an aspect of social consciousness that is exemplified in the art context. Difference and collectivity as social processes of recognition feed from the examples of modern and contemporary art. Art is nurtured and encouraged in return via cultural permission to be the space for what cannot be tolerated but can be accommodated under the conditions of neo-liberal globalisation.

Difference and collectivity are semi-autonomous concepts in the art context. The logic of their pursuit leads us to the conclusion that we should destroy all traditional relations of production in order to encourage a constant recognition of disagreement and profoundly different aims within a context of desire.

Consensus models are phantom parallels to the discursive. The notion of consensus through discourse is troubled by recent changes. The post-war is over and can now be re-thought as a definable historical period—the era of the social democratic project of Western Europe and other regions that shared its cultural and political pressures. The post-war had its moments of trauma, doubt and complication, such as the 1948 election in Italy when the communists were expected to win a landslide victory and the CIA exercised its first real operation in undermining an election in Europe by paying the Christian Democrats to make sure it didn't happen.

The discursive is easily absorbed anywhere, because it has borderless qualities. It has become a crucial component of the biennale. The idea that the discursive encourages an internationalized border-free methodology is crucial to its potential failings and collapses. The occupation of time rather than space creates new problems of edge, and the edge is a modernist analogue.

The European neurosis is based on anxieties about the edge in connection to the victory of the Federated over the Republican. The federated as an idea is something that tends to be ignored in relation to art, but the discursive framework often functions like a federated series of organizations—once it goes beyond the collective, or goes beyond the communal, or beyond the suspended, it is essentially a series of federations. It's not a republican model, it's not truly a super-subjective model, it is a federation of relationships. It's not even really collaborative. This turns into a key question when the idea of the edge of the federation becomes a political marker within the European Union and you realize that the operatives of the discursive may be echoing the federated tendencies of European politics. How can you sustain a discursive framework without acknowledging it as an echo of the federated?

The experimental factory is another precedent for the discursive framework of recent art production. It is a dynamic legacy within

the notion of productive cultural work. In the Soviet Union every large city had an experimental factory. At Magdeburg today, there is an experimental factory—a model for the experimental, but without experiments. The factory that exists but does not produce. A dynamic paradox.

The post-war social project activated compromised forms of earlier idealized modernisms and created a mesh of alleviated working circumstances that left behind the experimental factory as an attractive model. You can draw a parallel between the rise of the experimental factory as a functional promise and the way critical exhibition structures developed alongside this—not to mention the well-known phenomenon in the contemporary art context of empty plants being turned into art spaces as part of a programme of regeneration.

By the time my generation born in the early 1960s had become active recipients of a post-war social dynamic, the physical manifestations of that dynamic—in varied forms of applied modernism—were supposed to be failing. We were told that certain markers of progressive modern existence, although apparently successful, didn't work and that no-one wanted them. This tension partly explains the desire of certain people to be involved in a discursive frame marked by architectural and structural legacies of the recent past, legacies that were viewed as a failure by both right and left—from public housing projects to communal experiments.

The discursive is linked to the question of leisure and time management. We have to address the promise of increasing leisure as a marker in the post-war era and its actual subsequent reduction. My Grandfather always wondered what I would do with all the leisure I would have. And the question now is: how do you know how much leisure you are having?

Control of time was traditionally the dominant managerial tool and as such it was rightly challenged. Self-management has subsequently become generalized in a post-industrial environment. It's the way even mundane jobs are advertised now: the idea that

it is essentially better to manage your own time within a framework that involves limitless amounts of work and no concrete barrier between working and non-working. This is something that the discursive frame of the art context underscores. The museum and the art centre are connected to the leisure-promise legacy, and to a democratization of style. It is the potentially neurotic and anxiety-provoking situation in which cultural producers operate. This has superficial advantages and clear disadvantages. The notion of permanent soft pressure, which finds form via the computer and digital media—a soft pressure to manage your own time in relationship to broader networks.

The notion of continual and permanent education is used in different cultures in order to escape what are actually clear political differences related to class, situation and power. It is the promise to the poor child as a way to get out of bad conditions. Working situations are not changed; the idea is that *you* have to change. The notion of flexibility within the workplace is a way to encourage people to rationalize their own disappearance or redundancy when necessary. Team-worked, flexibilised environments induce people to create predictive models that are resistant to true projections of future circumstances. Everything is permanently conditional and contingent and needs to be predicted in a speculative form. This phenomenon is combined with the increased sophistication of the dominant culture in finding ways to use and absorb earlier critical structures, in order to create a degree of information control.

Artists are increasingly alienated from traditional sites of production due to the economic forces of globalization and the increasing tendency towards displacement and subcontracting. This is another reason why the discursive thrives. Struggles over ideas at the site of production still exist but are constantly displaced and projected. These struggles may be reported but fail to be identified across borders, while the left is stuck in an excessive assertion of specificities and tense arguments about how to accept difference and protect the local.

We can see how this developed and left traces in the culture. Consider the history of Groupe Medvedkin from France, a collective that made films between 1967 and 1974 in the context of factories and other sites of production. They worked, filmed and agitated at the Lipp watch factory in France and subsequently in the Peugeot factory in Sochaux. You can trace a clear shift in these films that is mirrored in the dominant art context. From today's perspective, when looking at one of their films shot in 1967, you don't see any difference between the people who are running the factory, the people who are working in the factory and the people who are criticizing the factory from the outside. They all belong to the same culture. Even physically they look the same. There are nuanced class differences but those are hardly visible from the perspective of 2008. In 1967 the effects of post-colonialism had not yet shifted the source of cheap labour from various colonies to the neighbourhood of the consumer. But by 1974 the film *Avec le sang des autres* opens with a group of longhaired activists wearing old military jackets standing at the factory gates. They are attempting to play as a Brass Band to a group of silent, clearly embarrassed immigrant car workers, primarily from North Africa. These films show a clarification and separation of aesthetics in terms of identification, language and techniques of protest. Simultaneously you see a clear drop in communication. Modes of address have fallen apart. There are individuals talking but only within each group. Each group has developed a sophisticated role-playing function in relation to the other. They demonstrate 'positions' to each other. This shift towards the notion of a public faced by a complex display of self-conscious role-playing is familiar within the art context. It does not lack sincerity, it does not lack genuine political engagement, but the sense of facing closed parallel structures, however functional, does nothing to alleviate anxieties about the art context.

The changes in the economy that I described (flexibility, displacement, alienation) ultimately have had geo-political effects. The post-war consensus on models of behaviour and models of

production ended with the completion of European Union, at the time when the US and its allies declared permanent war on their illogical and uncontrollable 'other'. Now that the post-war period is over we face new anxieties, having to do with the relationship between art and the state; the legacy and influence of American models of modernism; the sustained potential of subcultural modes of refusal; and the problem of imagining and identifying other cultures. Two answers have been to turn towards the documentary and the experimental as a site rather than a methodology.

The discursive framework is challenged by these post-war geographical shifts, which involve the return of the edge or border. Suddenly the idea of the edge of Europe has become an urgent populist question again, albeit in a new way. This anxiety has been compounded by the atomization and disappearance of the post-war American military presence within Europe and its sudden coalescence as a singular army permanently at war. The reappearance of the American army in Iraq is in a form that was only possible once it had abandoned its guardian role within Europe. The end of the post-war period allows the discursive to coalesce freely, just as it allows for the US army to be deployed finally in a proudly aggressive form.

Maybe reconfiguring the recent past is an answer: not looking back too far. This is the role of the discursive. At the heart of the discursive is a re-examination of 'the day before' as a model for understanding how to act and what to present. It tries to get to the point *just before* the only option was to play the tuba to the workers. In the past I have used this quite frequently as a device. The day before the Brass Band became the only option; the day before the mob became the workers; the day before the factory closed; the day before *Hotel California* was released—the idea of a French bar in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to listen to and everyone waiting for the arrival of the 'soft' future.

But this approach creates peculiar problems. Reoccupation, recuperation and renovation not only are the tools of the discursive framework, but also the daily activities of a unified Europe:

creating engagement and providing activity. The intellectual and ideological implications are even more problematic.

The occupation of space rather than time is a key marker for people of my generation. We were told about the moment when universities and factories were occupied. During the right-wing backlash that was planned in the mid-70's and came into full force around 1980 with the Thatcher-Reagan project, there was a reluctant concession that the occupation of space could continue as long as it would no longer produce truly traumatic engagements. This is one reason why art funding shifted away from individual projects towards institutional spaces. The generation of '68 couldn't understand why we didn't want to occupy the spaces that they had saved and renovated. We could not understand why they were not trying harder to occupy time. Artists of that generation have always been interested in the idea of 'us and them'. They speak about being on the same side of the barricade. Today the notion of the barricade is a fraught concept at the heart of the anti-globalization movement. The broad coalition at the barricade has fragmented into small, activated groupings battling far from the front line.

Chaotic-opportunistic-capitalist globalization has retained what appear to be barricades, constantly shifting and adding layers of distance while creating new disguised locations of antagonism and creating 'protest events' often many kilometres from the real source of the problem. It has become difficult to identify a true and final barricade. The contingent qualities of the discursive occupy and echo this constant displacement, this permanent doubt about where the moment of engagement should be. The discursive does not fall into the trap of gathering at the first visible barricade. Instead it finds a network of relationships that it develops into a new topography of soft-control.

Not surprisingly renovation has become an ideological marker in this occupation of territories and deceptive barriers. Renovation is a technique used to create post-branded or ultra-branded environments that attempt to erase tense social relationships of

the past via an incomplete picture of what a 'whole' could be. The use of renovation within contingent discursive structures works with the language of renovated architectural practice. Temporary partitions, temporary environments, contingent spaces and so on are used as zones for discursive projection. 'Statement/events' develop and take place within the renovated rather than the firmly built.

As I have indicated, the discursive art practice is full of dilemmas, dangers and risks. It is packed with projections and traces of post-war social desire. The decentred quality of critical art practices is charged with an anxiety about the combination of the local and the international. This contradictory quality is exemplified by displays of the local to the international (and vice versa) within the context of globalised cultural journeys. The discursive offers the potential for art to operate within smallish groupings out of sync with contemporary circumstances yet deeply embedded within its values and flows.

If we accept the post-war period as a closed period, we have to think harder about whether the discursive is merely a gesture towards the recuperation of ideas, places and values. The discursive frame may merely be playing out various recuperative projects that are tacitly encouraged within a terrain of closure and globalization simultaneously.

The 'big other' that envelops this is eco-political awareness. It underlies our behaviour without actually becoming a dominant subject in the serious art context. It is a permanent background factor that disrupts and diverts political rhetoric. Eco-political consciousness is always re-sited and displaced under globalization. An awareness exists that affects all behaviours beyond political specificity, even in vociferous denial. Eco-political consciousness is a sweeping narrative that warps and confuses the smooth continuation of the discursive. Car production has been my way of looking into this question—car production in the post-war period as the site of class struggle, national projection, the trajectory of modernity and now anxieties about the environ-

ment. This is linked to the urgent political paradox of progressive models being essentially wasteful and unresponsive to the environment. Putting the artist instead of his work on display is no longer an ecologically conscious gesture; but still this prevails as an alternative to the 'commodification' of art.

We are facing an inevitable ecological catastrophe. At the same time we are personally impelled to do something in order to prevent it. This creates a collective dilemma that disrupts the smoothness of discursive art projects, including those with a more local and contingent focus. Lukács wrote about the idea of human agency in relation to the revolution. If the revolution is inevitable, when or where does the revolutionary come into the picture? Because surely you can just sit around and wait for the inevitable collapse of capitalism to happen. There is an analogy in our relationships with eco-politics—a tension between mapping the inevitable and acting to prevent a global crisis. We all know that the only real solution is a change in the political system, but in the meantime we will help out by recycling and taking the hybrid bus to work.

The discursive demonstrates a neurotic relationship to the management of time as a negatively activated excess of discussion, discourse and 'hanging around'. This forces us to think about revised languages of production within the context of self-management. The rise of team-work and networking is linked to a denial of complex and disturbing old-school production relationships that still exist as a phantom for progressive thinkers. Discursive art contexts are intended to go beyond a mere echo of simple production relations via small flexible groupings, but they are subject to the same complexities that afflict any self-managed environment, even when they refuse to create a time-table.

One of the great social struggles of the 20th century has been the one between speculation and planning. We can say that speculation has won while the rhetoric of planning has become something we reserve for the people we don't know what to do

with. We plan for them but everyone else should speculate. It is for this reason that I think the factory needs to be looked at again. The factory—as a system—allows you to analyse relationships in a totalizing way, in order to create a continual map of productive potential. Although the factory is always the playing field of the speculative, as a model it is of structural use, because of the aspects of industrial planning. The myth is that speculation lures production, industry, and investment. However, it is always caught in a psychological and philosophical dilemma. In order to effectively activate speculation, one needs to plan.

The last few years I have worked on ‘The Volvo question’. I conducted most of this research via Brazilian academic papers that concern the legacy of 1970s production techniques in Scandinavia and the emergence of post-Fordist models of flexibility, collaboration and better working environments. In the Volvo factory you can see trees while you are making cars. But you are still making cars, never taking a walk in the woods. Where are the models for contemporary art production in the recent past? Is it Volvo, is it the collective or is it the infinite display of the super-subjective? And do these factors share a similar cultural DNA?

The idea of collective action and the idea of being able to determine the speed with which you produce a car, whether you produce it in a group, or individually, or at night, or very slowly, seems close to the way contemporary art production has developed. In the last 10 or 15 years there has been a synchronization of desire and structure. Discursive, fragmented, atomized, content-heavy art projects have somehow freed themselves from the classical problem of commodity culture and taken on the deep structure of work and life. What happened at Volvo was that people ended up creating more and more free time, and during that free time they talked about ways to work faster. The trauma and attractiveness of infinite flexibility has led to the logic of redundancy, both in the cultural sphere and in the realm of industrial production. Ford bought the company and reintroduced the standard production line, not because it was more efficient in

pure capitalist terms but because it clarified relations of production.

The most significant and clear development in contemporary art practice in the last ten years has been the appearance of a documentary tendency. The documentary was developed in order to replace the degraded Anglo-Saxon model of the fourth estate: the press and related media. The expectation is that the fourth estate has a reasonably effective checking function within the culture. Even in ‘progressive’ media such as New York based ‘Democracy Now!’ the idea of a free press is still used as a marker of a fully functional society.

The idea of a documentary structure in recent contemporary art is incredibly important. The documentary has found a temporary home as the content of the discursive. The discursive is a cartel-like structure that combines settings for discussion alongside production from other generations, both younger and older, who are committed to doing detailed documentary work. This cultural work is a component of the discursive, not a free-floating series of components in its own right. Although the documentary always tells you something about a concrete location, the idea of a documentary structure is not that it actually produces something within itself; it merely provides a series of locations which offer the potential to identify where critique ‘should’ take place. This is a convenient alliance that tells us something about certain shared critical contingencies. Within the discursive the moment of engagement is not critical. It merely presents a potential, just out of reach. It provides the potential to identify where the critical moment might be. This goes against the notion that art realizes its critical potential at the moment of engagement. The discursive framework would be punctured, troubled and disturbed if it merely mirrored what the dominant culture already knew. The documentary threatens to become an excess of relative content within institutionalized forms of the discursive. As the discursive frame cannot sustain a didactic hierarchical structure, it is in constant tension with the idea of documentary mirroring.

We are currently in a situation where suspension and repression are the dominant models. There is anxiety about who controls the reshaping of the stories of the recent past. The discursive framework has been predicated upon the rejection of the idea of a dominant authored voice. Clear-cut authored content is suspicious both politically, socially and ideologically. However, there is still the feeling that stories get told, that the past is being reconfigured, and that the near future gets shaped. There is a constant anxiety within the discursive frame about who is doing this, who is marking time. The discursive is the only structure that allows you to project a problem just out of reach and to work with that permanent displacement. Every other mode merely reflects a problem, generates a problem, denies a problem, and so on. The discursive framework projects a problem just out of reach and this is why it can also confront a socio-economic system that bases its growth on 'projections'. In the discursive art process we are constantly projecting. We are projecting that something will lead to something else 'at some point'. True work, true activity, true significance will happen in a constant, perpetual displacement.

As the focus within the discursive is upon permanent displacement, it provides a location for refusal and collective ennui. The permanent displacement and projection of the critical moment is the political potential of the discursive. The opposite of performance, it is not a location for action but instead provides an infinite suspension of critical moments. This is its 'just-around-the-cornerness'. A permanent interplay of micro-critical expressions within the context of a 'setting'. Projects are realized that expose a power relationship with the culture. They achieve this via an adherence to parasitical techniques: destroying relations of production via a constant layering of profoundly differing and contradictory aims. Somehow it might be possible to bring together small groupings and create temporary, suspended, semi-autonomous frameworks. It is possible that we have seen a rise in the idea of parasitical relationships to the point where they have reached a fluid state of acceptance. We may have reached a

moment of constant reoccupation, recuperation and aimless renovation. Maybe the discursive makes it possible to be a parasite without a host. Feeding off copies of itself, speaking to itself and regenerating among its own kind.

The discursive demonstrates a clear desire to produce situations that are open and exchange-orientated in tension with the forces that encourage self-redundancy. It is an activation of counter-methods. We've had flexibility and now we are redundant yet we refuse to stop working. The discursive cultural framework is the only way to challenge the forces that encourage self-redundancy as it internalizes and expresses consciousness of the most complex and imploded forms of developed capitalism—the notion that capitalism mutates in the face of a reluctant workforce rather than due to some naturalistic quality or drive.

The political potential of the discursive framework comes from being 'out of reach' and 'too close' simultaneously. It is art functioning as a structural parallel to contemporary working dilemmas in the dominant culture. In a discursive frame there is always an element that parallels the machinations of globalized capital; that is both its strength and its weakness. It starts from the position of understanding the process of redundancy-via-flexibility; it co-opts that process, but for different ends, in order to redirect the apparent loss.

The question is how to develop a discursive project without becoming an experimental factory and without slipping into a set of conditions that lead to certain redundancy. It is the attempt to hold the collective on this brink that energises the discursive context. We have created the conditions for the experimental, but no actual experiments. Or vice-versa. The discursive is peopled by artists who increasingly accept a large number of permanently redundant citizens and who have come to terms with the notion of the permanently part-time worker in the face of the permanently educated artist. Micro-communities of redundancy have joined together playing with the difference between art time and work time.

The discursive is not about audience participation or being absorbed within the space of art. (Knowing how to behave or whether you are included or not is only a question of manners.) The structure itself is no more the 'work' than the objects that frame the space. The discursive does not create sites for viewing or contemplation—instead it provides distraction and examination, reoccupying spaces that were never fully occupied in the first place.

The discursive is a production cycle, rather than a fixed performative moment in time. Instead of a permanent 'association of free(d) time', it uses certain production analogies in relation to 'what could be useful'. It occupies the increasing gap between the trajectory of modernity (understood here as a flow of technologies and demographic developments) and the somewhat melancholic imploded self-conscious trajectory of modernism. It is within this zone that we can explain the idea of no surprise, sudden returns and acceptance of gains and losses as symptoms and catalysts simultaneously. It is here that we can build contingent critical structures that critique both modernity and its critical double.

The discursive is a practice that offers the opportunity to be a relatively un-examined, free agent in a collective project. While the discursive appears to be an open generator of positions, it actually functions best when it allows one to 'hide within the collective'. It allows the artist to develop a set of arguments and individual positions without having to conform to an established model of artistic or educational quality. Incomplete projects and partial contributions are central to an effectively progressive, critical environment. But in the discursive they are not expressed, instead they are perpetually reformed. The discursive needs to retain this sense of reclaimed speculation in relation to 'lived' future models if it is to retain its semi-autonomy in relation to instrumentalising or divisive, chaotic and insincere market rationalisations.

There is a doorman working at the entrance, who is very good at recognizing people. He is also a judge of character based on facial appearance. However, he is blindfolded. The doorman is accompanied by a colleague who is unable to move. Tied to a chair. Incapable of physical activity. At the right time, when the music has finally stopped, people stream out past the doorman. After their activity and all their engagement with the party, the mood is subdued, people just leave normally. Not making any fuss, no rushing, just moving away. There are no lengthy periods spent milling around, talking and looking at cars. At the end of this party there's just a group of people quietly going on their way.

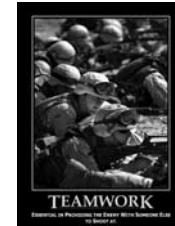
Philippe Parreno, 'Snow Dancing', 1995

This text develops and clarifies a week of improvised lectures at the free school unitednationsplaza in Berlin in 2006. unitednations-plaza was organised by Boris Groys, Martha Rosler, Walid Raad, Jalal Toufic, Nikolaus Hirsch, Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Tirdad Zolghadr, Anton Vidokle and Liam Gillick and operated in 2006-2007 in Platz der Vereinten Nationen, Berlin. In addition an early form of this text was sent to 43 people in Australia to read and react to as the artist's contribution to the Sydney Biennale, 2008.

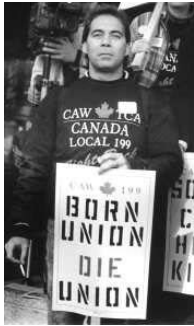
Liam Gillick is an artist based in London and New York. Solo exhibitions include *The Wood Way*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2002; *A short text on the possibility of creating an economy of equivalence*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2005 and the retrospective project *Three Perspectives and a short scenario*, Witte de With, Rotterdam, Kunsthalle Zurich and MCA Chicago, 2008-2009. Selected group exhibitions include *Singular Forms*, Guggenheim Museum, 2004; *50th Venice Biennale*, 2003 and *documenta X*, Kassel 1997. In 2006 he co-founded the free art school project *unitednationsplaza* in Berlin. Liam Gillick has published a number of texts that function in parallel to his artwork including *Literally No Place* (Book Works, London, 2002); *Five or Six* (Lukas & Sternberg, New York, 1999); *Discussion Island/Big Conference Centre* (Kunstverein Ludwigsburg, and Orchard Gallery, Derry, 1997) and *Erasmus is Late* (Book Works, London, 1995). *Proxemics (Selected writing 1988-2006)* (JRP-Ringier) was published in 2007. *Factories in the Snow* by Lilian Haberer, (JRP-Ringier, 2007) will soon be joined by an extensive retrospective publication. In addition, Liam Gillick has contributed to many art magazines and journals including *Parkett*, *Frieze*, *Art Monthly*, *October* and *Artforum*.













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AKV|St. Joost Art Academy, Avans University, Onderwijsboulevard 256,
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De Hermeslezing is een tweejaarlijkse lezing over de positie van de kunstenaar in het culturele en maatschappelijke spanningsveld. De lezing vindt plaats in 's-Hertogenbosch en is een samenwerking tussen Hermes, een netwerk van ondernemers, en het lectoraat beeldende kunst van AKV|St. Joost, Avans Hogeschool.