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Art Begetting Art, and Social Commentary, Too
'Anti-Establishment' and Liam Gillick's Work at Bard

A survey of Liam Gillick's work from the early 1990s in "From 199A to 199B."

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ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — The road to a job as a museum art curator used to be winding and haphazard. Now there are degree-granting programs like Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies and Art in Contemporary Culture, which has been processing aspiring organizers of world-changing exhibitions for 20 years as of this summer.

Along with other anniversary events the center is presenting a pair of exhibitions in the spacious galleries of Bard's Hessel Museum. Viewed as independent shows, "Anti-Establishment" and "From 199A to 199B: Liam Gillick" are remarkably enervating. Considering them in light of the occasion, however — and that one was organized by the center's executive director, Tom Eccles, the other by its graduate program director, Johanna Burton — the shows are fascinating to think about together. What do these exhibitions tell us about the education of curators today?

In her brief introductory essay Ms. Burton characterizes the model of the artist implied by "Anti-Establishment," which she organized. Seemingly contrary to that title, the 13 individuals and collectives she picked are not uncompromising rebels. They do little to unsettle well-established norms of contemporary art making. But, according to Ms. Burton, they imagine "novel collective relationships and emergent models of engaged citizenship."

Some of the work is overtly political. Sculptures by Wynne Greenwood consist of pink, portable televisions equipped with strap-on harnesses; mainstream and queer cultures collide.

A duo called H.E.N.S. present a weakly humorous installation revolving around a pair of adult-size baby bouncer seats that you can sit in, positioned in front of a television playing a sock-puppet show. The long title of this piece is worth quoting for what it says about the ennui of the citizen artist steeped in stale theory: "Alternative Pedagogy and New Left Daycare II, consisting of: H.E.N.S. World-Historical Sock-Tragic Puppet Drama, Marxist Baby Buggy Bouncers, Pragmatic Piscene-Pedicure Program; Showing The Subject's Passage from Vulgar Individualism to Agonic Pluralism."

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much of the work is more self-reflexively preoccupied with art than with worldly affairs. Scott Lyall's opalescent, Minimalist canvases, digitally covered by thousands of tiny bits of color, invite thought about painting in an age of mechanical reproduction. "Kiss Solo," an installation of videos of young men dancing by Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly, is a response to "Kiss," a performance work by Tino Sehgal that was part of his exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 2010. Pam Lins makes prickly, abstract sculptures out of plaster, string and other materials, which she displays on sleek pedestals. A wall label notes that Ms. Lins "was thinking about a particular photo of Henry Moore in his studio and the parts of sculptures that are usually hidden, or better, covered up."

There is an exhilarating exception to the prevailing conceptualism: an installation in its own gallery of Abstract Expressionist-style paintings made with vibrant Day-Glo paints and displayed under ultraviolet light, by Jacqueline Humphries. With their nearly hallucinatory, artificially enhanced luminosity and quicksilver shapes the paintings suggest a sudden irruption of transcendental energies into imaginative consciousness.

None of the artists in "Anti-Establishment" exemplify Ms. Burton's characterization of the engaged citizen artist more completely than one who is not in her show: Liam Gillick, the subject of Mr. Eccles's exhibition. Routinely associated with the much-debated Relational Aesthetics movement, Mr. Gillick is a nearly ubiquitous figure on the international art scene as a conceptual artist, speaker, writer and collaborator with other international luminaries like Rirkrit Tiravanija and Pierre Huyghe. He designs shiny, quasi-architectural sculptures for sale in commercial galleries, but here the focus is on projects from the 1990s, driven more by verbal than visual thinking.

If you like the idea of reading news articles, letters, documents and other sorts of informational material as an art experience, this show is for you. Sprinkled throughout "From 199A to 199B" are fabric-covered panels onto which invitees — all alumni of the Bard Center program — have pinned material from magazines and other sources that caught their eyes and minds. One large gallery has pushpin panels covering the lower parts of the walls all the way around. Tacked to them are pages from Tattoo Magazine and an operational manual for a large airplane. A lot of uncovered pinup surface remains, so you can only imagine the flood of information that could be in store.

For another project Mr. Gillick proposed that copies of all the public papers of the United States presidents be displayed in a gallery and made available to anyone interested. Here, as a compromise, they are accessible on computers via the Internet.

One room is reserved for a project called "Moral Maze" that has yet to happen. Mr. Gillick will invite people who have been peripherally involved in activities of politically and ethically fraught import — minor players in the illegal drug trade, for example — for public discussions in the gallery.

Mr. Gillick represents a model of the artist that is especially popular now in academic circles: the activist social critic who tries to intervene in mainstream currents of contemporary complacency and awaken politically critical consciousness by any means. It is easy to see the appeal of that model for today's ambitious curator, who, in turn, replaces the old model of the curator as a

connoisseur of visual aesthetics. The new, professional curator is a globe-trotting intellectual sophisticate, attuned like Mr. Gillick to an ever-expanding field of ideas rooted in Marxist gospel. Under the new curatorial regime art becomes an educational and participatory experience often tied to newsworthy events of the day.

Artists whose primary concerns are social and ideological will appreciate this sort of curator. Those invested in aesthetically and metaphorically resonant objects of uncertain practical utility might feel excluded and misunderstood. But in a few years or decades the paradigm will change, as tenured faculty retire. New tread will be put on old rhetoric. The marginalized will be returned to the center and the favored cast out. That is just the way it goes.

"Anti-Establishment" and "From 199A to 199B: Liam Gillick" continue through Dec. 21 at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; (845) 758-7598, bard.edu/ccs.

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