Mediating Sociality:
A Contested Question of Contemporary Art

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> The local area produces light bulbs, special light bulbs for films. Bulbs are to be used as lamps for particular situations. And all the workers drink a lot because the place where they are is basically the only place that's working; it's the only place that appears to be function-ing like a factory. Everyone else in the area might as well be building their own vision of a hovercraft.

> The lamp factory lamps are used in the making of films. The only factory, the only place in this bar ridden environment where there is the memory and projection of an idea of produc-tive work. Where there might be some echoes of earlier visions of how to get better. The factory is the first factory that has ever been seen in these parts yet it's a factory that produc-es unique things. It never produces the same thing twice, it makes lamps to order, it makes special lamps (Gillick 2002, pp. 33, 35).

The passages above – evoking industrial production, media production, customiz-ation, and the "productive" working of subjective imagination – belongs to a text that is indicative of the proliferation of artistic practices that turn around the concept of "the social". They are taken from *Literally No Place. Communes, Bars and Greenrooms* – a book by the British artist Liam Gillick presenting the fragmentary narratives of six nameless characters who conduct research on the participants of a utopian commune.

The book is clearly a piece of fiction. Yet it seems to resist full immersion in a fictional universe, among other things due to a number of "theoretical" quota-tions that are spread throughout the book and that seem to open up the fictional universe to a wider grid of relations. In fact, this wider grid extends well beyond the format of texts: it is further elaborated in Gillick's visual and spatial work, which plays off key ideas and figures found in the book. Gillick's book is then not so much a singular work of art as a nodal point in a network that includes the following elements: A group of fictional personae and their actions and reflec-tions. A well-known body of writings in the fields of philosophy, political theory and utopian speculation, ranging from Marx and Adorno to B.F. Skinner and the Khmer Rouge. A series of colorful and stylishly designed architectural or quasi-architectural constructions set up in galleries, museums and public spaces. (Ill.1) A series of suggestions as to what type of managerial, pedagogical, communitarian or creative behaviors or actions might possibly be facilitated by these constructions.

And, finally, the people who may visit the museums or public spaces in question and may or may not feel compelled to engage in the sort of action proposed, implicitly or explicitly, by these constructions.

Ill 1: Liam Gillick, Filtration, 2001. Courtesy Eva Presenhuber, Zurich.

None of these elements are reducible to one another, in the sense that real or imagined social behavior would be metaphorically represented by spatial constructions that have a parallel articulation in the field of fiction but that would ultimately be contained and explained by social and political theory. Instead Gillick's book is a part of an *assemblage* of heterogeneous elements that together make up what I will call a social site. In what follows, this particular assemblage

will be discussed as an *art-specific production of sociality*. This particular approach to the artwork as a social site may open up a discussion around the artwork as a medium or the mediatic status and function of art – since the concept of artwork as medium is invariably the point of departure for discussing the social and political dimensions of artworks. This is notably not just linked to the commonplace realist notion of a medium as a vehicle of communication – in the sense that the artwork is understood to transmit realities that lie outside of its art-specific or aesthetic concerns. Historically, the question of artwork as medium came to the forefront in conjunction with the introduction of new technologies of mass recording and distribution such as film, photography, radio and phonography. Confronted with the increasingly social power of these media, art production and aesthetic theory was forced to rethink the relation between art and social or collective issues: The understanding of these issues would now be informed by analyses of the specificity of the various technologies deployed – their specific ways of producing meanings and ordering sensations. Association with, or adaptation to, the new mass media technologies thus emphasized the close relationship between social technologies and artistic techniques: it was from this point of view that works of art could be linked to specific modes of production or to the various ways in which technologies discipline bodies and produce ways of seeing and thinking.[1] However, within the discourses of 20th century art, the question of the relation between art, medium specificity and sociality was handled in distinctly contradictory ways. A formalist and aestheticist conception of medium specificity – the idea that the artwork should primarily evolve out of and reflect back on whatever is specific to its material support and the specific sensorial register engaged by this support – was increasingly contrasted with a new mode of performative, interventionist or actionist work that seemed to have privileged access to social issues and processes precisely by eschewing the focus on the specificity of artistic media.[2] With the staging of this contrast came the idea that socially engaged art had no use for the "mediatic" function of self-referential aesthetic frameworks too often focused on an artificial separation and reification of the human senses. Instead, it would directly access the heterogeneous political

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1   In his 1943 lecture, "The Author as Producer", Walter Benjamin states that the social content of a work of art is related to its technique, not to its political attitude (Benjamin 1975, pp. 107-122.) In *Grammophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), Friedrich Kittler documents the way in which the specificity of the new recording and distribution technologies provided not only new orders of seeing and saying, but also new connections between social technology and artistic techniques.

2   The best-known and most systematic articulation of this position is the one presented in the writings of the American critic Clement Greenberg, most significantly in "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (1940) and "Modernist Painting" (1961). Both republished in *Art in Theory 1900-1910 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*.

and psychological materials of "the real" – an artistic strategy that has, among other things, been dubbed "the post medium condition".[3]

The widely used distinction between artistic medium specificity and post-medium art productions has, however, severe limitations when it comes to understanding the social thinking generated in artistic productions. For the problem is that these terms and distinctions all essentially depart from a preoccupation with the definition of the work of art, its ontological and phenomenological aspects, and terms of interpretation. This preoccupation tends, explicitly or implicitly, to frame all discussions of artists said to work in and with the social, whether they are lauded for activist or interventionist acuity or accused of bad immediacy or a return to naïve realism. The artwork status is the key frame of reference, while the question of social contents, strategies or operations emerges as a secondary frame, arrived at as if by special effort or detour. In contrast to these ways of framing the issue, *Literally No Place Communes, Bars and Green-rooms* may serve as an instructive counter-model, a model that challenges us to think differently about not only the notion of artistic and aesthetic media or mediation in art practices, but – as significantly – about the concept of sociality itself.

II

To speak of artworks as social in one sense or another is to engage with what is today a contested topic in art production and criticism. If post-1960's art has renewed the historical avant-garde's focus on the social or collective aspects of art production and reception, the last 15 years have been marked by a certain shift in emphasis. The predominance of institutional critique and interventionist strategies has, at least to some extent, given way to a preoccupation with various forms of collaboration and co-presence as well as community-oriented approaches that seem to explicitly offer up the positivity of the social as an arena for artistic activity.

While there is nothing exactly new about this, the weight and visibility given to this type of practice is historically unprecedented. At the same time, it is precisely the meaning of the notion of "the social" that has become the contested core of contemporary debates. At the one end, practitioners oriented toward actionist politics and community work often question the relevance and necessity of the artistic context or the art-institutional framing of their activity. At the other end, less immediately actionist approaches – work that does not explicitly ad-

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3   The "real" here could be understood in the colloquial sense as well as in the more specific Lacanian sense of the word: In Hal Foster's (1996) account of avant-garde history, works of this type distinguish themselves by bringing up traumatic material that tears apart the "image screens" of official culture and history writing.

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dress political trouble zones but simply seems to evoke interactivity and collaboration in a "softer" or "looser" sense – has come under attack for its supposedly harmonizing or conflict-insensitive take on the social. This type of work is now often critiqued as an apolitical idealization of social "networking" in the name of art. In any case, all such approaches have to face the question of why artists should work with social situations when this is obviously done more efficiently and convincingly by social workers, activists and politicians – not to mention party planners, bar owners, club hosts, etc., etc.

At stake here are both notions of the critical difference or autonomy of art and aesthetics *and* the autonomy of social/political activists vis-à-vis the interested but ultimately uncommitted embrace of agents whose final allegiance is with the field of art. The stakes are in other words construed around the question of art as a medium for some entity named "the social", with possible losses and gains calculated both on the "art" side and on the "social" side. This is why discussions of much avant-garde work tend to turn around the essentially legalistic question of the frames and limits of art and its institutions.

Yet, this type of focus tends to overlook the specific ways in which *the social here is produced through, or in terms of, artistic work and aesthetic situations.* At the actionist or community oriented end of the scale there is often a political/strategic *use of* the art institution: For visibility and funding, for instance, or because it may accommodate an exceptional type of ethical operation that depends on a temporary, disinterested or ritualized framework in order to come about. And, at the less explicitly problem-oriented end of the scale, the social may be evoked through self-consciously aesthetic or aisthetic operations, sensorially oriented frameworks that seem to complicate the very idea of the immediacy and self-evidence of "community", even as they draw actual audiences or participants into various forms of interaction. In both cases, the framework of art and aesthetics plays a fundamental role in conjuring up a particular social object, although in ways that may seem largely incompatible. Grant H. Kester's *Conversation Pieces. Community and Communication in Modern Art,* and Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another. Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* are to date the most influential attempts to discuss the political and ethical dilemmas that arise when what could well appear as social work is conducted or initiated from within the art institution.[4] And yet, even as they discuss similar types of work, these authors frame "the social" in very different terms. Kester's concern is with a type of artistic practice that too easily falls outside the purview of art

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4   In the same context Nina Möntmann's *Kunst als sozialer Raum* (2002) should also be mentioned: it is a thorough discussion of the various constructions of social space in the work of Andrea Fraser, Martha Rosler, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Renée Green.

criticism and his book is primarily an attempt to develop frameworks of explanation that allows the specific political achievement of this type of work to be understood and critiqued in aesthetic terms at all. "Dialogical Aesthetics" is the term suggested by Kester in order to indicate a practice of listening and intersubjective exchange alien to the presentational emphasis in most Western art and aesthetics. By picking up elements from Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics as well as ideas on how subjectivity constitutes itself through communicative interaction with others found in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Mikhail Bakhtin, Kester conjures up an aesthetic ideal that is based in ethics. And ethics is seen here as fundamental to any thinking or philosophy since it is key to the very constitution of subjectivity. However, this ethical/aesthetic model or ideal must be brought into some strategic relation with the quotidian practice of human interaction in order to be of interest. It is this strategic relation, performed in a number of situational or activist artworks, which is ultimately the object of Kester's study (Kester 2004).

But it is also at this strategic level where Kester discusses the artistic engagement with what he calls "politically coherent communities" – pre-existing communities or communities created through the context set up by the artwork – that his work comes under the critical radar of Miwon Kwon's project. In her book, Kwon traces the shift in public art from large-scale sculptural objects to physically or conceptually site-specific works to audience-specific or issue-specific projects. This shift – described as a passage from an aesthetic function to a design function to a social function – is understood as a displacement of the very concept of "site" itself: Audience- or issue-specific works are understood in terms of a discursive virtualization of the site in the sense that the social identities evoked through such work are constructed within complex discursive fields. And it is from the point of view of this virtuality – theoretically underpinned by Jean Luc Nancy's non-identitarian theory of sociality presented in *The Inoperative Community* – that Kwon critiques Kester for harboring essentialist ideas of communitarian identity. In her view, such essentialism is politically dangerous in that it may reinforce prejudices surrounding existing and problematic social identities rather than focusing on future constructions of the social (Kwon 2002). Kester's response to this critique is that it is precisely the pragmatic and situational application of dialogical aesthetics that will determine the political validity of each project: a blanket charge of essentialism is simply too abstract given that the collective identities in question may well understand themselves as contingent or contextual rather than natural or essential. While Kwon seems to reject the very idea of coherent community, arguing that truly critical work must take place in the interstices between identities and communities, Kester believes that

unanticipated forms of knowledge can be produced through dialogical encounters with politically coherent communities.

For all their differences, however, Kester and Kwon seem to share one basic presupposition: Both define sociality in terms of community, in relation to which "art" has a tangential function: For Kester, art takes on a negotiating function, whereas for Kwon art ensures a discursive virtualization of community issues, against the threat of essentialist identity politics. Translated to the medium perspective, Kester treats art as a type of special intermediary, whereas Kwon relies on a concept of medium reflexivity derived from a formalist art criticism preoccupied with art's sustaining and differentiating relation to itself (the history of its own technical means): here, community issues are – so to speak – sifted through an interest in the framing devices or parergonal structures through which modern art's relation to its own "inside" and "outside" is negotiated.[5]

These community-oriented approaches could, however, be held against a different articulation of sociality in or through artistic projects, one that takes as its point of departure the specific social formations produced through modern art itself. It is a type of work where the social seems to be specifically evoked in terms of the kind of *forming* and *shaping* that is generally understood to be at the core competence of modern art, but also in terms of fashion, architecture and design. Here, sociality is in other words conjured up through those instances that are generally recognized as the "official" limit phenomena of art proper. For architecture, design and fashion continually emerge as instances in which art's spillover into general culture is either anxiously debated or euphorically celebrated. And, to a large extent, the anxieties and euphoria surrounding the art/design/architecture boundary seem generated by the problematic issues of style that run through avant-garde practice: the dream of creating new styles of life on the basis of artistic creativity or the fear that genuine artistic style will bleed into the superficial stylistics of commodity culture. This complex boundary situation is now made into a site of artistic activity in its own right: what we may call a style site. Keeping these impulses in open tension against one another, this type of work establishes a site of activity where the contradictory sociality of 20th century art itself is produced as a space of play and projection. At this site, the utopian promise of the generalization and use-value of artistic creativity is held in check

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5   Kwon's account is based here on Rosalind Krauss's discussion of the artistic medium as a recursive structure, i.e., a structure in which some of the elements will produce the rules that will generate the structure itself. This opens for a view on artistic media as not given and fixed, but as continually made or produced. Medium specificity in art should thus be understood as a self-differentiating activity, not as a framework for an increasingly ossified reproduction of purely art-internal concerns (Krauss 1999).

against the experience of how such creativity is mobilized to great effect by contemporary life-style industries of so-called cognitive capitalism, not least in their contribution to the creation of the kind of infinitely mobile or malleable subjectivities that are both the raw materials and the products of this economy.[6] It is this conundrum that is brought up in Liam Gillick's *Literally No Place. Communes, Bars and Greenrooms*. And his handling of this conundrum does not just present us with a different artistic mediation of the social, but, more pertinently, with a wholly different understanding of sociality itself: for this reason it is worth tracing in some detail.

III

To begin with, the title itself spans the whole contradictory range of social spaces informed by notions of artistic creativity. On the one hand there is the commune, the utopian experiments in alternative living. From the early days of Soviet constructivism to the artist-created alternative societies such as those created by the Wiener Actionists or the present-day Atelier van Lieshout, there is no commune without a marked ideology of art, an idea of how art plays into the social economy. On the other hand there is the greenroom, the liminal space where participants in TV shows wait before they go on camera and where they mingle afterwards. It is a social space that frames televisual performance and thus demarcates the shaped and controlled nature of televisual real-time; the apparently spontaneous and unbroken flow of events that aligns TV time with lived temporality in general.

In between the two, mediating between them, keeping them both together and apart, there is the bar: The place of easy conviviality and togetherness, where the focus and purpose of "production" is temporarily and ritually suspended. And while the bar is often idealized as a space of real communality, a public place where social differences are supposedly laid aside, it is also a dream space of sorts. For more often than not the bar is also a heavily designed and stylized space, a space whose designs project other times and places in the midst of "ordinary reality" – not entirely unlike the type of everyday escapism facilitated by a medium like TV. So, in a very simple and basic sense, the bar could thus be seen as a space that mediates between the social utopia of the commune and the mediated sociality of the greenroom.

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6   This scenario is discussed in more detail in my book, *On the Style Site. Art, Sociality and Media Culture* (2007).

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The bar – or its close equivalents, the lounge, club or party – is a key element in numerous contemporary "social" artworks: points of departure for audience interaction or the creation of temporary forms of togetherness. In a trenchant and not atypical critique of the work of artists like Liam Gillick and Rirkrit Tiravanija (as well as the concept of relational aesthetics, launched by Nicolas Bourriaud in response to this type of work), Claire Bishop zeroes in on the use of bar/lounge situations, claiming that this approach to sociality rests too comfortably within a quasi-democratic ideal of community as immanent togetherness and consensus. What is produced in such work is basically a feel-good model of sociality that evades the actuality of social differences or antagonism and the need to understand democracy as a space where such conflictual relations are sustained rather than erased (Bishop 2004, pp. 51-79).[7]

This critique is relevant enough on its own terms, and would have to be taken to heart if the bar/lounge concept of "getting together" constituted the single, isolated and perfectly transparent core of Gillick's work. But, as *Literally No Place* indicates, the conviviality of the bar/lounge-situation is but one moment or function within a larger assemblage of elements. The point – missed again and again in the critical writing – is also that there is no one approach to artistic work with "the social", just as there is no one sociality "out there" that can simply be mediated by artistic activity. Unless one develops a more differentiated set of notions of the often incompatible *forms* of sociality produced in artistic activity, this type of criticism will unwittingly tend to reinforce entirely traditional realist and essentialist notions of both "the social" and "the artistic", notions that presuppose each sphere as a given: Sociality here seems accessible to artistic activity precisely because of its imagined separation from "art proper", generally meaning various types of formalist approaches etc. Moreover, this sociality only exists "for" art to the extent that it is primarily a field in which problems are to be solved, relations engineered. Here, the standard artistic and art critical approach to the social reflects what Bruno Latour has identified as the dominant trend in sociology since Emile Durkheim – notably the tendency to conflate the understanding of the social link with the need to solve specifically "social" problems: a sociology that understands itself as a political project devoted to the task of engineering modern society.

The key idea behind this take on the social is the notion that there exists something like a social context in which non-social activities take place: As Latour puts it, the social is presented as a specific domain of reality that always encompasses the agents that are "inside it", and that can be used as a specific

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7   Bishop responds in particular to Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998).

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type of causality to account for the residual aspects that other domains (psychology, law, economics, art, etc.) cannot completely deal with (Latour 2005, pp. 3-17). Social science has managed to make this definition of society into the default position referred to by all other disciplines as well: This is why boundary problems arising in the field of art tend to be referred to as the problem-solving domain called "the social". It is along this line of thinking that issues of style, form or aesthetics are routinely separated from any discussion of so-called social art-works, whether that art is defined as context art, community based art or activist art. Style and aesthetics are what art and art history deal with "on their own"; a different set of issues "belongs" to the social.

In order to think beyond this framework, art criticism has to open up its own concept of the social – for instance by paying attention to the small subfield of sociology that Latour calls "the sociology of associations", but that is more offi-cially known as actor-network theory. Inspired by the example of Gabriel Tarde who thought of the social not as a specific realm or context, but as a kind of circulating fluid or mobile webs of imitation and influence that should be fol-lowed by new quantitative and qualitative methods: The social here is not a thing among things, but a principle of connectivity between things that are not them-selves social. Focus is then less on domains, contexts or fields than on new con-figurations or associations between elements. While this might seem like a vague type of proposition compared with the relative fixity of the notion of a social domain, Latour argues that this principle of connectivity actually lies behind the most common experience we have in "encountering the puzzling face of the social", since these new associations –which we may encounter in the form of a new job description, a new political movement, a new form of medication, a new law – force us to question, in each instance, what it is that we are supposed to be doing with each other (ibid.). This concept of sociality is of course much wider than the usual meaning of the term, yet it strictly limits itself to tracing new as-sociations and designing their assemblages. There is no reason why the complex web of elements that come together under the title *Literally No Place. Com-munes, Bars and Greenrooms,* should not be seen as a new and puzzling "social surface" that poses a challenge to pre-existing definitions of social links. Only by tracing to the specific combination of things in these works can we discuss their equally specific way of not just handling but *producing or inventing* instances of tension, contradiction or antagonism. And this again has consequences for our understanding of the artwork as a mediator of social relations. Its role as a me-diator must obviously be distinguished from any residual ideas of the artwork as some sort of intermediary or communication channel. In Latour's definition, an intermediary transports meaning or force without transformation, so that when

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defining its input one has also defined its output. It unifies and should be counted as one single thing (even if it may be made up of many parts). A mediator, in contrast, has a different function: Its input will never predict its output and the specificity of the connections it sets up has to be taken into account in every single instance. No matter how simple a mediator may look, it may become complex, leading in multiple directions that will modify whatever is attributed to its role (Latour 2005, pp. 37-42).

No simple mediation of any existing social object comes forth in the confusing web of literary, political, architectural, visual and sculptural elements through which Gillick's communes, bars and greenrooms are evoked. All one has to go by is a certain structuring principle that seems to inform the entire assembly. For each of its elements seems suspended between two great machineries of social production that each comes with its own spaces, formats, history and theoretical literature: Notably the utopian and the televisual. As it happens, the medium of television and the various historical instances of utopian imagination could all be described as time machines, in the sense that they all administer complex temporalities where the future or the past continually impinges on the present. In fact, Gillick's work is entirely organized around such issues of temporality: its specific take on "the social" cannot be grasped without reference to it.

One might start out by tracing this question of temporality in the presentation of the commune, more precisely in Gillick's extensive deployment of *Walden Two,* B.F. Skinner's novel about a scientific utopia, based on behaviorist engineering of human relations. You do not read far into this book before issues pertaining to art, architecture and design are brought up: In fact, these are among the first things discussed by the protagonists who visit the commune for the first time and discover the various design strategies and innovations that are described at length (Skinner 1962). There are, for instance, practical benches with tables attached as well as specially designed food trays that facilitate eating, and – even more importantly – save time and effort during cleaning. There are hanging tea-glasses that are practical both for keeping the drink warm and for helping yourself to several cups in one go. On the communal bulletin board, all information is given in plain typeface and with no glaring images, so as to avoid visual competition. A similar attitude is reflected in the dress code, where one tries to abolish the waste of time, effort and expense imposed by constantly changing fashions: A broadening of the tastes instead allows each woman (the emphasis in the text is here on women) to develop her own personal beauty rather than be constricted by irrational style dictates. A similar broadmindedness seems to reign in the architectural department:

> The rooms were decorated in various styles. It was possible to dine briskly in a white-walled room bustling with speed and efficiency or at leisure in a pine-paneled Early American dining room in beeswax candlelight, or in an English inn whose walls carried racing pictures or in a colorful Swedish rooms. Two carefully designed modern rooms, one with booths along one wall, came off well by comparison.
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> I was rather offended by this architectural hodge-podge […] Through some principle which I did not fully understand, it appeared that the ingestion of food had something to do with the development of aesthetic preferences or tolerances (Skinner 1962, pp. 46).

In this controlled cultivation of variation and individuality, design is a critical instance, minutely described and evaluated. A plurality of styles is advisable since it seems to promote a form of "aesthetic tolerance" that is compared to food tolerance: You will not be bodily *affected* by it. Art, in contrast, remains curiously neutral in relation to the constitution of the commune itself. All one gets to know is that in an age of generally second-rate art, the art produced in the commune is of high quality. In fact, its production is basically the success symptom of a wide array of pragmatic design strategies that range from the design of cafeteria trays to the behaviorist design of minds and bodies – strategies that, taken together, procure the sum total of leisure time necessary for everyone to be given the opportunity to be artistically creative. "Leisure's our levitation", as the original creator of the commune puts it. Art is then mainly the signifier of "free time" – or the ability to enjoy "seeming to be free" as the creator also puts it. In sharp contrast to Joseph Beuys's romantic (and quasi-Marxist) suggestion that *all* forms of work be associated with the creative freedom and self-determination of artistic work, free time is now strictly a product. The utopian commune is a rational, economist, purveyor of free time, art time. And it is precisely access to this time, or rather to its imagined freedoms, that makes the steely discipline of the commune endurable.

The objects, texts and images assembled around the title *Literally No Place. Communes, Bars and Greenrooms* insert themselves into precisely this separation between pragmatic design strategies and artistic creativity. Or – to put it more succinctly – into the separation between the potential "waste time" of fashion styles and the "spend time" associated with true artistic style and form. Evoking Skinner's utopian novel, they intrude in the entirely familiar economy of art that seems to subtend the sociality of Walden Two, an economy that dictates that in order to be able to freely spend time on art, time must not first have been wasted on the empty stylistics of fashion. For while *Walden Two* reiterates a typically modernist ambivalence about the relation between art, architecture and fashion, this ambivalence is not primarily sexual (as in the type of architectural discourse which vehemently protects the idea of construction from the feminine eroticism of fashion), but has to do with time management (Wigley 2001). Gillick's intrusion into this complex then first and foremost takes place at

a stylistic level – that is, at a level where the styles that may feed into either art-works or design solutions take on a certain independence or autonomy with respect to the two temporal registers.

The only thing that seems certain is the fundamental complicity between the two temporalities: The imagined freedom of "art time" is determined by a disciplinarian shaping and forming that produces surplus time and that could itself not be endured without these moments of freedom. The time of true art style and the time of fashion stylistics are reined in, controlled and connected in the same economic circuit. What Gillick seems to want us to remember, however, is the larger issue of the administration and mining of time that is a key factor in production in general. For, first among the series of quotes that frame and break up the main narrative of *Literally No Place* is County Magistrate Broughton Charlton's appalled speech on child labor, reported in the "Daily Telegraph" of 17 January 1860 and quoted by Marx in "Capital". And here, in this absolute grotesque of capitalist production, it is, above all, issues of time – the ages, the hours – that give offense:

> 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 (Marx quoted in Gillick 2002, p. 6).

To the extent that the minutely perfected economy of art time and design time at Walden Two has a recognizable, familiar, normalizing beat to it, it is perhaps because it could also be seen to have something in common with the no less persistent but far more variegated and subtle mining of time in contemporary production. The behaviorist utopia of Walden is the place where the very forces of desire are designed, and kept in check and productive, through sophisticated techniques of self-government: this is how Walden Two manages to do without more traditional governmental bodies. External forms of government and politics are not necessary since each person governs him- or herself without even noticing: the constant payoff (time for art) makes control seem like freedom. For the forces of desires that are controlled in this art/design economy are wholly associated with the forces of time and temporalization.

What all this means is that the utopia of *Walden Two* is maybe not all that far away from us. If anything, its obliteration of external forms of government may seem like a parodic extreme of the forms of self-disciplining characteristic of neo-liberalist control society. In fact the question of the actual distance to *Walden Two* – brought up through metaphors of finding, staying at, leaving or returning to the commune –returns as a key issue in *Literally No Place*. The main narrative

of Gillick's book takes off where *Walden Two* ends: that is, where Skinner's narrator describes his final decision to return to *Walden Two* in order to live there. He returns to its isolated location on foot, getting stronger as he walks: "My step was light and I could feel the ball of each foot pushing the earth down from me as I walked" (Skinner, 1962, p. 319). In *Literally No Place*, a group of people, walking for no clear purpose, seems to encircle a terrain that is recognizable as *Walden Two* only because of the repetitions that resonate between this text and Skinner's novel. While Skinner's narrator intently returns, Gillick's walkers, having no clear plan and only unresolved desires, seem to swing in an arc. However, their walking is described in the same optimistic metaphor as the one used by Skinner: *Their step was light and they could feel the ball of each foot pushing the earth down from them as they walked* (Gillick 2002, p. 7).

This sentence, which seems to express the desire invested in the very "ground" of this contemporary utopia (a strange type of ground since utopia "literally" means "no place"), triggers a series of ambiguous design solutions. Gillick suggests that it could, for instance, be reframed as a logoed beach towel – a true token of the free time exploited by the leisure industries – with the sentence woven into its fabric, as a corporate logo of sorts (Gillick 2001, p. 56). And in a 2003 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, the same sentence was turned into a three-dimensional signboard made up of big colorful letters in modernist sans-serif typeface – a sleek corporate-style space divider cum signage system that was used – along with an abstract wall painting – to frame a bar/coffee shop area placed in the vast lobby area of the museum. Both letters and wall painting have strong elements of those orange colors contemporary designers seem to agree signal happiness, activity and optimism. The orange signage system served to draw you to the typically "social" place in the museum, the place where you relax and discuss the more solitary experiences had in the art spaces proper. But it would be more precise to say that the signage system overlays two different spaces; notably the museum bar and Skinner's commune. These spaces could be seen to represent reciprocal economies of art: In the commune, the time of art is the quasi-exceptional but necessary instance that keeps the checks and balances in order. The museum bar, in contrast, provides the momentary and necessary time-out from the demands of art (the museal demand that one has a productive relation with art). The time of art is in any case the common denominator between the two spaces: continually evoked, produced, framed or kept at bay by design that guarantees its "unproductive" productivity.

Such patching-together of different spaces – some articulated as real physical environments and others theoretical or fictional, some present and others distant – is a key strategy in Gillick's work. Phrases or objects or phenomena described

in a text may, for instance, inform design solutions that give an actual physical site, a place of real communal activity, its formal and functional specificity. While his texts repeatedly speak of discussions that are about to take place, or that should hopefully take place, Gillick designs environments that might seem to accommodate actual discussion situations: Metal-framed canopies made out of multicolored Plexiglas, lamp-like ambience creators that sift the light so as to provide a minimal prerequisite for a communal situation such as a discussion. Here, a mere change in the light quality equals the design of an "open" social space, as if a metaphor of free and open-ended exchange. Yet the optimistic orange glow produced by many of these discussion platforms also indicates the way in which the metaphorical association between open space and open exchange is also framed by a fear of the articulation of conflict. "Discussion" is always presented as benevolent – and, as in the fictional texts – a quasi-obligatory activity that never actually seems to go anywhere. In actual fact, discussion never really takes place, at least not under Gillick's explicit guidance. Gillick's design solutions remain elliptical and suggestive, never entirely devoted to the communal actuality of the present. His built spaces are invariably infused with the presence of an elsewhere: hence their "difficult" or puzzling quality. His corporate-style signage constructions – decorative and functional space dividers like the one demarcating a bar area at The Museum of Modern Art – typically present quotes from texts that could be said to be historically or ideologically related to this environment but not, perhaps, to the way this environment tends to understand itself. (Ill.2) In this way they tend to undercut the behavioral patterns, habits or ideals that are most readily associated with their visual/spatial signifiers – in fact with the whole concept of *habitus,* the usual "social" framework for understanding the non-social objects with which we surround ourselves, as developed in the art historical analysis of Erwin Panofsky and then transferred to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.[8]

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8   Bourdieu's concept of habitus was adapted from Erwin Panofsky's description of the relationship between Gothic architecture and scholastic culture. Panofsky claimed that scholastic principles had no *direct* effect on architectural design: if scholasticism can be traced in the construction of Gothic cathedrals it is mainly because it had turned into a general creative mindset that informed the work of the builders of the time. Bourdieu translated Panofsky's work on Gothic architecture into French and acknowledged this as the source of his own use of the term habitus in "The Genesis of the Concepts of Habitus and Field", 1985-86.

Ill 2: Liam Gillick Literally (Structure), *2003. Courtesy MoMA, New York.*

IV

It is at this point that it becomes possible to ask about the location or function of the third space evoked in *Literally No Place*: notably the greenroom. The commune and the bar have to some extent been evoked through the interaction between textual references and physical constructions, but the space of the greenroom – a space associated with televisual real-time production in the broad sense of the term – seems slightly harder to locate. It seems above all to present itself

as a specific ordering of time that enters into close dialogue with the temporal economy of the commune. The greenroom is then, in this specific sense, *literally no place.*

In the commune, the relation between time and production is that of a rational, no-loss system of exchange. The full and ideal present – the moment of pleasure and self-realization that is identified with the creation of art – is a guaranteed effect of an economy of time that both separates and connects work and play, useful pursuit and leisure. In contrast, the time of TV production evoked by the greenroom indicates a less rational temporal economy: the full and ideal present is quite simply harder to locate. While constantly promoted and fetishized, associated with ideals of immediate experience and new forms of co-presence and communication, TV presence is also what continually slips away. As a mass medium, television is construed around highly overdetermined notions of presence. The concept of the live media event – the most remarkable benefit of television's real-time technologies and its most characteristic format – connects disparate people and places in a communal experience: this is why it can be described as a new arena for ritualized behavior. And its new modes of journalistic presentation attest, as Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz have pointed out, to the concept of immediate co-presence: No longer an outside commentator cynically open to any meanings, the media event reporter tends to be actively involved in the official meaning of the event as it unfolds. Operating in the middle of TV presence, she *enacts* this meaning (Dayan and Katz, 1992, pp. 89-92). Yet the dispersed nature of TV audiences obviously challenges traditional notions of communality, and its transmissions across time and space radically change the very notion of the "presence" of perception itself.[9] The greenroom – the place where you wait before and after your TV presentation – frames TV live-ness with a nervous sense of the just-before and just-after: "Sitting in a greenroom […] thinking about how to present", as Gillick puts it in *Literally No Place*. In Gillick's work the greenroom is above all the metonym for this slippery and refractive presence.

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9   This point is discussed at length in Samuel Weber (1996). Weber is interested in what he calls the differential specificity of the medium of television – a medium whose live transmissions do not simply overcome distance but seem to somehow short-circuit the notion of distance itself. It renders distance invisible by *transposing it directly into the live vision it transmits*. This short-circuiting implies a split in the unity of the body's time and place – a well-known feature of both film and photography as well. But in television this separation is combined with a *presentness* associated with sense perception that involves the actuality of the body in a very different way. It sets up a surrogate for the body in that it allows sense perception to take place, but in a way no body can, for its perception takes place in more than one place at a time.

But if Gillick's text presents the greenroom as the place where people "circulate around the present", it is also presented as "a true place of debate that may be the perfect model" (Gillick 2002, pp. 48-49). More than just a space at the margins of live TV, the greenroom is actually the model for the contemporary public sphere. The consensus environment of post-corporate or postindustrial societies may thrive on certain values retained from the utopian commune: hence the idealization of participation, discussion, conviviality, etc. But the very definition of such phenomena is transformed by the "flickering relationships" instigated by the TV culture that subtends this environment. This overlay of rational construction and televisual flickering presents itself in terms of a concrete design solution, the so-called *Big Conference Center Relational Tool* (1998): A raw, "functionalist" pine wall inset with small halogen lights that glow like single pixels, intended to "highlight a location where it becomes possible to engage in constantly flickering relationships".[10]

It is through such overlays that Gillick creates a new instance of sociality, or new social surfaces: A – certainly controversial– association between utopianism and TV culture that opens onto the question of how utopianism figures in contemporary production. By playing off the ambiguous role of art and aesthetics in the economic distinction between work-time and free-time, Gillick's associations force us to confront the similarities between Skinner's government-free behaviorist commune and the emphasis on "free" self-production that plays such an important part in today's cognitive capitalism or consciousness industries. The commune idealizes the free time of art, but since this instance of freedom is here also presented at once as the pure product of time-saving design, *and* as that element that will make the general state of (self)control endurable and possible, art is in fact inscribed in a temporal economy that has a purchase on *all* human time. This general purchase on human time is a characteristic feature of a type of production in which televisual technologies – a synecdoche for all sorts of real-time technologies – keep us productive around the clock, largely thanks to their ability to intimately interact with human sensation, perception and memory (Lazzarato 2002). From the point of view of contemporary TV culture, the commune's attempt to distinguish between art and design comes across as irrelevant: *all that matters now are the uncontrollable forces of "style",* or the everyday aesthetics of self-styling or self-production. (Ill.3)

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10   This quote is taken from the website of Gillick's Paris gallery Air de Paris, www.airdeparis.com.

Ill 3: Liam Gillick, Literally No Place Bar/Floor, *2000. Courtesy Casey Kaplan, New York.*

These overlays – which depend on a principle of connectivity that brings together elements from a range of different contexts, material sources, technologies, disciplines and traditions – are the true mediators in this work: the agents that open up new definitions of what it is that we are doing with each other. This is the critical mediating operation through which at least parts of contemporary art's current "confusion" of art, architecture and design should be understood. It is a mediation that restages the historical relations between art, design and utopian desires, putting art's contradictory relations to both responsible planning *and* surprise invention, time management *and* temporal escape, into free play. It restages, in particular, the avant-garde's often-professed desire to break down the barriers between art and design, opening onto the duplicitous nature of this desire. These are, in fact, the antagonistic dimensions of modern art's own sociality, endlessly debated and fought over: the contemporary aestheticization processes only render them more acute. Here, Gillick's methodology differs fundamentally from the ordinary critical approaches to the social aspects of art, which tend to depart from analyses of the specific artistic media or of the institutions: such media or institutions are the default figures for the way in which the social envelops or contains "art itself". In contrast, *Literally No Place. Communes, Bars and*

Greenrooms traces an unpredictable transversal movement through various materials, contexts, and apparatuses of sensation and perception – an aesthetic movement that is unique to this project and that should in fact be defined as its true medium.

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