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ByLiam Gillick

Readers of this site fearless enough to trudge through the gloss-paper advertising swamp that is this month's Artforum might be surprised to find this site referred to as the 'the Mute Beta (then known as Metamute) blog' in an article on Chris Gilbert's resignation by Liam Gillick. Whilst the confusing reference is somewhat unhelpful for readers who may want to follow-up the debate, which can be read in full here: <http://www.metamute.org/en/node/7834>, Gillick is a not unintelligent commentator on the issues of political commitment, professionalisation and institutionalisation in the art world post-institutional critique

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CURATOR CHRIS GILBERT has resigned from his position at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Mobility among art institutions has been an increasing feature of art mediation and presentation over the past twenty years, but Gilbert doesn't seem to have left in order to write a book, research a group exhibition, or move on to a bigger and better place. What is uncommon is his decision to resign on a matter of political principle and then call for a radical rethinking of the role of the curator and the artist in a contemporary-art context. This is a highly unusual step for someone working within a mainstream museum environment. In his May 21 letter of resignation—which is still circulating on the Internet and has been further distributed by e-mail—Gilbert writes that art institutions

will go on reflecting imperialist capitalist values, will celebrate private property and deny social solidarity, and will maintain a strict silence about the control of populations at home and the destruction of populations abroad in the name of profit, until that imperialist system is dismantled. Importantly, it will not be dismantled by cultural efforts alone: A successful reform of a cultural institution here or there would at best result in "islands" of sanity that would most likely operate in a negative way—as imaginary and misleading "proof" that conditions are not as bad as they are.

These assertions have prompted some serious reflection and caused a few eyebrows to be raised into the stratosphere. As the controversy unfolds, it highlights the void between rhetoric and practice within a developed and striated art discourse. During a period of social and political strife, within the context of a superheated art market, there is an increasing gulf between those artists and curators who have carved out a path of resistance via ongoing critique of social systems and those who function in a more complicit relationship to the contradictory impulses that affect art production and mediation. For some it is increasingly difficult to follow Deleuzian aims toward complex understandings, the subtle likes of which may be said to have oriented artistic and critical discourse for decades. To quote the philosopher in his *Two Regimes of Madness* (1977), "We've been trying to create concepts with fine articulations, extremely differentiated concepts, to escape gross dualisms." For Gilbert, it seems that such critical self-consciousness in relation to art production can no longer be productive within a society that, as he sees it, is inured to the delicate probings of the super-self-conscious artist, curator, or critic. It is a time of gross dualisms once more, and it is necessary to take a stand and make a careful choice about who will be there alongside you.

On the face of it, it appears that Gilbert resigned over the issue of a wall text for an exhibition he curated this past spring titled "Now-Time Venezuela: Media along the Path of the Bolivarian Process." But, of course, no one ever really resigns over a wall text. The title gives you an idea of the political theme of the show—a complex collection of video material that creates a layered view of emergent models of social formation in Venezuela today. The museum's administrators were by all accounts

fully supportive of the exhibition, and provided a forum for discussions that were dynamic and open to many voices. What seems to have agitated them is best explained by quoting from Gilbert's letter: "Their plan was to replace the phrase 'in solidarity' with revolutionary Venezuela with a phrase like 'concerning' revolutionary Venezuela—or another phrase describing a relation that would not be explicitly one of solidarity." Institutional information and guidance conveyed via didactic wall texts are a contested territory that fragments opinion among artists, curators, and critics who would otherwise agree about generalized issues concerning art display and presentation. Commenting in the *New York Times* about the May 9 Judd Foundation auction at Christie's, Roberta Smith praised the auction house for avoiding the temptation to present anything much more than the work itself. In other situations, artists and curators have collaborated on reclaiming and newly complicating the institutional voice, as, for example, through the (non)information accompanying the work at the recent exhibition "Grey Flags" at the SculptureCenter in New York. Some artists don't care about wall texts, and some curators just leave things to the education department, washing their hands of responsibility for the text and intervening only when the generally anonymous voice of the museum or art center appears to have slipped into a parallel universe of muddled rhetoric and overreaching claims about the painfully obvious. In this instance, it seems pretty clear that Gilbert was the one who wanted to impose an overt institutional voice and specific reading on the exhibition. This is an inversion of the normal tension between the contemporary curator and the institution, wherein the curator's need to make a precise claim is in direct conflict with the museum's desire to generalize and take a soft yet critical approach to the contents of its space. But we're talking about Berkeley, not Beverly Hills, and the "administrators" did finally agree to retain Gilbert's wording. Nevertheless, by then he had apparently reached his limit and decided to quit a system and structure he felt would always be looking to restrict his increasing desire to agitate and present while at the same time determine viewers' reading of work.

This is an important step by a curator, and it has complex implications. We are used to a situation in which the artist is notionally free to present multiple forms of rhetoric, disturbance, or collapse. The official history of contemporary art is full of moments that reflect allegiance to resistance and critique, from Gerhard Richter's presentation of "October 18, 1977," his 1988 series of paintings of members of the Red Army Faction and related subjects, at his 2002 Museum of Modern Art retrospective, to Richard Serra's antiwar poster derived from Abu Ghraib imagery, recently on view in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. There is also a parallel and firmly established world of Dionysian excess, characterized by willful refusal of engagement, in which the artist is permitted immersion in irresponsibility—as has been the case with the Austrian group Gelitin, the scatological megashows of Paul McCarthy, and the recent speculative interest in Martin Kippenberger's legacy. The system tends to tolerate these artists under the protection of free speech (with notable exceptions during the culture wars of the '80s and '90s and in the case of neopopulist potboilers like 1999's "Sensation" at the Brooklyn Museum of Art), with an acknowledgment that an artist's function in society is often to present the unrepresentable or unpalatable. This role is accepted since we know there is a precedent for artists showing us what we will not accept in any other form.

If Gilbert had just presented the films with no contextualizing text, "Now-Time Venezuela" would probably have come and gone without further comment beyond the positive reviews it had already received. Instead, Gilbert has stepped over a previously ill-defined line and stood alongside his artist colleagues, using the institutional voice to direct our reading of an exhibition. He went beyond becoming one with the work on view and moved out in front of the artists/filmmakers, (over)stating a case in order to disrupt the normal flow of relativistic distancing that typically accompanies radical practice. But, as Martha Rosler has written about Gilbert's action, "Perhaps solidarity can be evoked and supported in the viewers by not predetermining quite so firmly the rhetorical turns that might accompany it."

In 2004, I worked with Gilbert while he was a curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art. We spent time in his windowless office discussing the future direction of the museum and the possibility of intervening within the structure of the place. Fast, charming, and frequently stunned by the peculiar processes that affect the presentation and mediation of art, Gilbert evidently retained some faith, as far as I could tell, in the potential of contemporary critical practice, even in a place as established as the BMA. Therefore, it was possible for us, the contemporary curator and the contemporary artist, to find some strategic partnership toward a pointed critique of the institution. As we all know, such an approach can leave the museum and art structure intact while at the same time exposing its desire to incorporate and absorb the notional critique it is generating. While the museum would have been happy with some attempt to address flow or to mediate the entrance spaces to mask its tools of survival (e.g., an ugly gift shop), we ended up taking a much softer and stealthier approach: a presentation of all the printed material that had been distributed by the BMA in 2004, redesigned and re-presented in the contemporary galleries of the museum. It was a low-temperature project that exposed the hierarchical structure of exhibitions in the face of the contradictory pressures that confront a place of privilege in a deeply divided economic and social context.

During our time together, Gilbert frequently expressed a desire to speed up the processes of change that he felt could be generated within an art discourse, though he didn't seem in a hurry to do much about it. Nonetheless, I wasn't surprised when I heard that he had left the BMA to become the Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator at the Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive. Working at a place with a radical and engaged past must have seemed appealing after the departmentalized and potentially stifling solidity of the BMA.

Gilbert himself has not publicly elaborated on his motives or offered his own take on the trajectory of his practice, and his silence has opened up space for speculation and debate. An exchange between critic and activist Brian Holmes and artist Sarah Lewison summarizes some terms of the conversation. On the Mute Beta (then known as Metamute) blog, Holmes commented:

If the kind of work that Gilbert has presented in museums finally radicalized him to the point of taking this notion of solidarity seriously, and insisting on it, then I admire both that work and its results. Why immediately assume . . . that it's self-aggrandizing? What if it were just somewhat stylistically disjointed, like someone stepping onto the high wire for the first time? Why not openly support the "high-wire act" and also, get ready to help catch the acrobat if he falls? How about a little solidarity when someone takes risks?

Lewison responded:

I would like to believe that Gilbert is different, and has a distinctively ethical approach. And I think it would be great if this current event led to a broader discussion of ethics and solidarity. But if Gilbert's actions are simply characterized as heroic . . . it does make me feel queasy. Such heroism will leave the uneducated and financial underclasses behind once again.

While Gilbert's departure has, for many progressive voices, become an occasion for reflection and reassessment, Gilbert himself appears to have gone to ground for a while. E-mails to his Berkeley address go unanswered, and his cell phone doesn't connect. There are rumored sightings of him in various cities. There is even talk of his having bought a one-way ticket to Venezuela. It seems that Gilbert may have found a new place under the sun.

Yet this might be a moment to continue communication rather than to take up new allegiances that also require critique. Toward the end of his resignation letter, Gilbert writes, "One should have no illusions: Until capitalism and imperialism are brought down, cultural institutions will go on being, in their primary role, lapdogs of a system that spreads misery and death to people everywhere on the planet." Whether you feel he is overstating the obvious or else coming to a conclusion that for many

people is the starting point, there is an increasing call for Gilbert to return to Berkeley and continue pressing at the limits of curatorial rhetoric in a context in which it might be possible to shift the terms of engagement.

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