

Loose language: on Liam Gillick's *Industry and Intelligence*

The artist's new book is confused and lacking in rigour

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*A detail from Hans Holbein's painting of Erasmus (1523). Despite promises, the philosopher makes no appearance in *Industry and Intelligence**

"There is no way to draw a logical conclusion about the political, moral, or ethical stance of the artist by attempting to resolve their rhetoric with what appears to have been produced."

This statement, which comes 15 pages into the artist Liam Gillick's new book, *Industry and Intelligence*, is his attempt to describe why writing by contemporary artists is often pointless. And so it is also a perfect criticism of his book. Around 30 pages later, he offers another bit of self-analysis when he laments the "constipated self-accounting statements and phrases artists are expected to deploy in order to contextualize and educate about their own practice".

These moments of clarity are rare throughout the rest of the book, which ostensibly charts the intersections of art and technology since 1820. It is not a history; it is, instead, a "genealogy" that traces the past to explain the present. *Industry and Intelligence* therefore seems to be exactly a "constipated self-accounting" of Gillick's own sleek art, which is often made with the aid of industrial materials like Plexiglas and aluminium.

But who is to say? The book has so little focus that Gillick's aims, whatever they are, are knowable only to him. Aside from 1820, his key years are 1948, 1963 and 1974.

"These dates were not chosen because they are central," Gillick writes in his introduction, which immediately makes one wonder, is it even worth reading on? Then, in a continued effort to deflate his own book, he adds: "The paradox of contemporary art means that there are no special years; all years are special when considering the multiple strands of its accommodating structure. In the classical manner of the contemporary artist, I chose these years for a subjective reason."

Gillick seems to believe that "subjective" means "meaningless," or perhaps "random," and so he has added all sorts of random, meaningless flourishes to his book. A chapter titled "1820: Erasmus and Upheaval" makes no mention of Erasmus, nor is the theologian listed in the index. (Erasmus, by the way, died in 1536.)

Another chapter, this one about 1948, includes this dumbfounding set of sentences: "Art became connected to a democratisation of society where an individual's work was the product of some work and nothing more. Art as a process of making art. Art as a part of society: society as a developing idea and art as a part of that developing idea."

Gillick's breathless non-sequiturs are everywhere. Here is a typical example: "The decision to change is an obligation. Burning paintings is the originating myth. The point is to join the highway via the onramp at full speed. Then choose which lane to occupy. Slowing down or getting on or off again is difficult and undesirable. Difficulty is internal in this place."

There is difficulty here, indeed. But if we are feeling generous, we must admit that there is a little bit of truth in all banality. "Contemporary art is a pile: it is essentially an accumulation of collapsed ideas in cumulative yet sometimes vigorous forms," Gillick writes. This is impossible to deny. We see it everywhere. So what makes a contemporary artist vigorous or lacklustre? Gillick absolves himself of the pressure of such a question. "Who possesses the critical voice?" he asks. "Attempts to possess the critical voice were deeply shaken by the emergence of the curatorial."

"The curatorial" is an ugly way of saying that curators have replaced critics as the authoritative interpreters of contemporary art. "The complete curator"—Gillick's preferred epithet—"is not a problem", he writes. "Some observers", he notes, have taken issue with "the sometimes tortured language deployed by the complete curator in their places of display and interpretation, including the writing of artists. But loose language is not the root of the lack here."

Only a writer who uses language as loosely as Gillick does could write a sentence like that because, on the contrary, loose language is exactly the root of the lack. It is exactly Gillick's careless attitude towards words that evacuates rigour and clarity from Industry and Intelligence. "Consistent contradiction has become the primary marker of the contemporary," he writes halfway through the book. Here is another rare moment of truth. Yet Gillick, as elsewhere, is unable to sustain it. He moves on, instead, to some other inconsequential thought. Perhaps there is a purpose here: to

avoid being pinned down by criticism and exposed to the light of clarity. But surely Gillick knows that ideas live sad lives in the dark.

Industry and Intelligence: Contemporary Art Since 1820

Liam Gillick

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