

[Liam Gillick](#) > [Texts](#) >

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

Liam Gillick

This essay began as a series of seminars given by Gillick at [unitednationsplaza](#), Berlin. A version of this text was given as the 2008 Hermes Lecture/AKV St. Joost, Avans University, NL.

"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

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-organized 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 conceptual art's reframing of relationships, and it requires decentered and revised histories in order to evolve.

If we want to understand tendencies in art, we have to look at the structures that underscore the sharing of ideas. This is especially true when we consider discursive processes to be the base of self-conscious art practice. It is necessary 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 for a moment to get away from anecdotal, local, and geographical relationships to artistic activity and away 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.

The discursive is the key strategy employed by the most dynamic contemporary artists, whether they are providing a contribution to a larger model of exchange or using discursive strategies as a structural tool within their own work. I am trying to test the validity of this discursive framework in light of what has developed in the culture since the fall of The Berlin Wall. There are some returns and absences that may affect our ability to continue as before. We also need to examine the notion of the discursive as a model of production in its own right, alongside the production of objects for consideration or exchange. The discursive is what produces the work and, in the form of critical and impromptu exchanges, it is also the desired result.

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 really imply coherence with notions of "discursive democracy" as posited by Habermas and others, yet within the cultural terrain it does have some connection to the idea of melding public deliberation while retaining the notion of individual practice within the "group."





Striking car workers, UK, 1990s

The discursive is a practice that offers one the opportunity to be a relatively unexamined, free agent within 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—rather, they are perpetually reformed. The discursive needs to preserve this sense of reclaimed speculation in relation to “lived” future models if it is to retain its semi-autonomy in relation to instrumentalizing or divisive, chaotic and insincere market rationalizations.

The discursive framework differentiates certain collective models, not the other way around. It is a mode of generating ideas and placing structures into the culture that emerges from collaborative, collective, or negotiated positions rather than as varied forms of “pure” expression or super-subjectivity. However, the discursive also provides a space where all these approaches can be included. The rise of content-heavy discussions—seminars, symposia, and discussion programs—alongside 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 spaces for art. These discussions are functional parallels that project in many directions. They are free zones of real production. They have also become an essential component of both didactic and contingent projects. Yet the discursive as a form of art practice in its own right is not reliant on these official parallel events. It both goes beyond and absorbs such moments, making them both material and structure, operating openly in opposition to official programming.



Production/manufacturing of the Volvo C30 at the Volvo Cars plant in Ghent, 2006. © Volvo Car Corporation

The discursive leads to the proliferation of the short text and statement, 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 as well as the collective project itself. The critical text is also the voice of the curatorial context. The site of 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 idea of the curator as mega-artist or the curator as neurotic traveler. The anxiety is that the critical voice has been merged with that of the curatorial. A misunderstanding has emerged here in the reaction to relational aesthetics, with the implication that this curatorial voice directs the critical flow. But this analysis of relational aesthetics got the moment of engagement the wrong way round—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 critical potential emerging from the moment

anxiety) from the artist to the curator. Yet we still make assumptions about critical potential emerging from the moment at which a flow is identified, rather than from the flow itself.

Recently we have seen the rise of a new group of people who have studied art history but have resisted or found no place within the standard systems of curating. This new “non-group” has not been completely identified, manipulated, or instrumentalized by the dominant culture, yet. They appear to be deeply embedded within hierarchical academic structures, but also do not deal with the merging of voices that constitutes a symbiotic alliance between the discursive

and the curatorial. They have studied art history but do not all want to be curators—or traditional critics, either. They have started developing a series of relationships, discussions, and texts that have created a new series of links between the potential of the discursive framework and much more traditional forms of academic work. The greater part of this new work is focused on trying to understand where the critical flow exists within the culture.

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

By the time a generation born in the early 1960s had become activated recipients of a postwar social dynamic, they were simultaneously told that the physical manifestations of it—in varied forms of applied modernism—were failing. They were told that they were within something that might appear to be succeeding and functioning in theory, but that certain markers of progressive modern existence were not functional, wouldn’t work, and no one wanted them. Reconfiguring the recent past accounts for this tension. It is a crucial component of a desire to be involved in a discursive frame that is often marked by architectural and structural legacies of the recent past—from public housing projects to communal experiments—which were viewed as a failure on both the right and the left.



Computer rendering of office discussion area, Germany, 2000s





BMW, 1990s, Germany

At the heart of the discursive is a reexamination of “the day before” as a model for understanding how to behave, activate, and 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.

The role of the discursive is to not look back too far. However, this creates peculiar problems. Reoccupation, recuperation, and aimless renovation are the daily activities of a unified Europe, and the function of the discursive framework as well—creating engagement and providing activity. However, the intellectual and ideological implications are rather more problematic.



Office, USA, ca. 1950s

We are currently in a situation in which 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 considered to be politically, socially, and ideologically suspect. 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 upon “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.

This permanent displacement provides a location for refusal and collective ennui. The projection of the critical moment is the political potential of the discursive. It is not a location for action, but instead provides an infinite suspension of critical moments—the opposite of performance. This is its “just-around-the-corner-ness”—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 through an adherence to parasitical techniques: destroying relations of production through 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 possible a parasite without a host—feeding off copies of itself, speaking to itself, regenerating among its own kind.



Striking car workers, USA, ca. 1930s

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 post-Operaitic models of developed capitalism—the notion that capitalism mutates in the face of a reluctant workforce rather than due to some naturalistic quality or due to its own drive. Teamworked, flexibilized environments are also a way to 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 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. The discursive adopts and co-opts this structural approach too but to different ends. It is the only way to offer a functional parallel to the dominant culture. In a discursive frame, there is always a critical double that has a degree of parallelity with the machinations of globalized capital. The discursive always functions in parallel, or just across from the idea of something that is already taking place structurally within society—this is its strength and its weakness.

The political potential of the discursive framework comes from its being simultaneously “out of reach” and “too close”—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, and it co-opts that process for different ends, in order to redirect its apparent loss.

"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 pushing, just moving away. There are no lengthy periods spent milling

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

Maybe we're trying to catch a moment, maybe an earlier moment. Maybe it's a Volvo moment—June 17, 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—that everything is a trajectory as long as we can keep things this way and Ford don't buy the company.

For those who grew up in postwar Europe, notions of group work were embedded in educational systems. From preschool "play-groups" through the organizing structures of management, with group discussion and teamwork, we find a set of social models that carry complex implications for people who think they can create something using a related, if semiautonomous, methodology.

The discursive is wedded to the notion of postwar social democracy. It is both a product of its education systems and subject to its critical potentials and collapses. The European context has surrounded itself with experiment-machines in the culture. The discursive framework's success or failure is connected to various postwar phenomena connected to identity politics and postcolonial theory. At the same time, the discursive is suspicious and resistant to the idea of a key protagonist. Without key protagonists, however, it is very hard to know what to do, when to occupy and when to function; however, the lack of leading voices does permit the discursive to evolve and include.



Production/manufacturing of the Volvo C30 at the Volvo Cars plant in Ghent, 2006. © Volvo Car Corporation

If we accept the postwar period as a closed one, we have to think harder about whether the discursive is merely a gesture towards 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 decentered quality of critical art practices meets an anxiety about the combination of the localized and the internationalized. This contradictory quality is exemplified by the discursive frame, with its displays of the local to the international (and vice-versa) within the context of globalized 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. This has a lot to do with a coalescence of smallish groupings, which then play out a suspension of aims and results within a context of indifference and projected future meetings.

The potential of the discursive framework is to engage the “out of reach” and the “too close” simultaneously—art functioning as a structural parallel to contemporary working dilemmas. A dominant, visible feature of certain developed, late-modern art practices is the idea that prior to being manufactured, a product must be sold. The discursive makes use of theories of immaterial labor in order to account for the blurred factors that surround and produce commodity value—to understand the set of factors that produce the informational and cultural content of a commodity. The discursive becomes a negotiation and demonstration of immaterial labor used for other ends.

Marx described the idea of identifying the true value of a chair in opposition to the commodity value of a chair. It is one of the philosophically weakest parts of Capital. Marx’s 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. This idea is exceeded and abandoned by the discursive, in sync with recent critical texts on commodity value.



Production in the Kalmar plant, which produced cars for Volvo between 1974 to 1994. © Volvo Car Corporation

I have worked on the “Volvo question” for the last few years. Most of my research on Volvo has been done through Brazilian academic papers concerning the legacy of 1970s production techniques in Scandinavia and models of flexibility, collaboration, and the idea of a better working environment in an ideally productive post-Fordist context. There has been a synchronization of desire and structure: in the last ten or fifteen years, discursive, fragmented, atomized, content-heavy art projects have somehow freed themselves from classical ideas concerning the problem of commodity culture. They have taken on the deep structure of work and life.

In the Volvo factory you can see trees while you are making the 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? 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, at night, or very slowly, seems close to the question of how to make art over the last fifty years.

At Volvo, people ended up creating more and more free time, and during that free time they talked about ways to work faster. In both the cultural sphere and the traditional productive sphere, the trauma and attractiveness of infinite flexibility lead to the logic of redundancy. In the end, Ford bought the company and reintroduced the standard production line, not because it was more efficient in pure capitalist terms, but because it reinforced relations of production.



Production in the Kalmar plant, which produced cars for Volvo between 1974 to 1994. © Volvo Car Corporation

One of the reasons why I think the factory needs to be looked at again is that the factory, as a system, allows you to look at relationships in a totalizing way. In terms of productive potential, the struggle between speculation and planning has been one of the great struggles of the twentieth century. We can now say that speculation won, and the rhetoric of planning has become something we do for the people we do not know what to do with. We plan for them, but everyone else should speculate.

The factory model is of use here: the factory has a planned quality in spite of the fact that it is always the playing field of the speculative. The myth is that speculation lures production, lures industry, lures investment, and in this way the factory is always caught in a psychological and philosophical dilemma: in order to effectively activate speculation, you have to plan.

In the Soviet Union, every large city had an experimental factory. At Magdeburg today, they have an experimental factory. The experimental factory is a dynamic paradox: a model for the experimental, without experiments; the factory that exists but does not produce. The idea of the experimental factory or workshop remains a dynamic legacy within the notion of productive cultural work. The postwar 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 of potential. You can draw a parallel between the rise of the experimental factory as a functional promise and the way critical cultural exhibition structures developed alongside it. Without even considering the common phenomenon of occupying abandoned plants of the recent past as the site of art, these exhibition structures did so according to a program of regeneration within the mainstream contemporary art context.

Perhaps it is possible to explain the discursive cultural framework within a context of difference and collectivity—difference being the key word that defines our time, and collectivity being the thing that is so hard to achieve while frequently being 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. As social definitions and processes of recognition, difference and collectivity feed from the examples of modern and contemporary art. Art is nurtured and encouraged in return by way of a cultural permission that grants a space for that which cannot be tolerated, but can be accommodated under the conditions of neoliberal globalization.





Dresden car factory

The discursive thrives when we are increasingly alienated from sites of traditional production, owing to the displacing effects of globalization and the increasing tendency towards infinite subcontracting. Struggles over the site of production still exist, but they are constantly displaced and projected—the struggles are reported, but are sometimes resistant to identification across borders. They exist within a context that offers an excessive assertion of specificities, as well as tense arguments on the Left about how to accept difference and protect the local.

Difference and collectivity are semiautonomous concepts in an 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. The focus of the discursive is more on the aims and structural efficacy of the cultural exercise than on what is produced. In turn, what is produced operates in parallel—unfettered by the requirement to be the total story.



At work on the Volvo production floor lining the XC60 concept car in dark-brown saddle-quality leather. © Volvo Car Corporation

But all of this is problematized by a nostalgia for the group. 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 postwar social project. Around this, there remain old relationships of production that still exist outside complex theories of the postindustrial that are at the heart of postwar “developed” societies.

We can see how this developed and left traces in the culture. Consider the history of the French Groupe Medvedkin, which 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. What you see very clearly in these films is a shift that is mirrored in the dominant art context. When looking today at one of their films shot in 1967, you do not see any superficial or linguistic differences between those who run the factory, those who work in the factory, and those who criticize the factory from outside—they are all from the same culture. Physically, they look the same. Though certain differences of detail can be determined, they are nuanced and require acute class consciousness. The effects of postcolonialism have not yet shifted the source of cheap labor from the various colonies to the neighborhood of the consumer. But Bruno Muel's 1974 film *Avec le sang des autres* opens with a group of longhaired activists wearing old military jackets, standing outside 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.



Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin



The museum cafe.

Through this series of films you see a clarification and separation of aesthetics in terms of identification, language, and techniques of protest. Simultaneously, you see a conspicuous drop in easy communication. Modes of address have separated. Different groupings are talking, but only within each group, and each group has developed a sophisticated role-playing function in relation to the others. 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 an art context. It does not lack insincerity, and it does not lack genuine political engagement—it is a functional parallel.

We have created the conditions for the experimental, but no actual experiments (or vice-versa). Micro-communities of redundancy have joined together to play with the difference between art time and work time. The question is how to develop a discursive project without becoming an experimental factory—without slipping into a set of conditions that lead to a certain redundancy. It is the attempt to hold the collective on this brink that energizes the discursive context.





Car fire, unidentified, 6/24/2004

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. The notion of continual and permanent education is used in different cultures in order to escape what are actually clear political differences to do with class, situation, and power. It is the promise to the poor child of a way to escape bad conditions. But within the discursive, the notion of self-improvement is ideologically specific and accompanies a philosophy connected to postwar power structures.

My grandfather's questions always concerned what I would do with all the leisure time I would have in the future. The question now is: how do you know how much leisure time you have? We have to address the reduction of leisure as a promise, and as a marker within the postwar. The discursive is linked to the question of who is managing time. Control of time was traditionally the dominant managerial tool, and it was rightly challenged. Self-management has subsequently become generalized in a postindustrial environment. It is the way even mundane jobs are advertised now.

The idea has become that it is essentially better to manage your own time within a framework that involves limitless amounts of work, with no concrete barrier between working and non-working. This is something that underscores the discursive frame—the potentially neurotic, anxiety-provoking situation within which we find cultural producers operating. It has superficial advantages and clear disadvantages. It is a notion of permanent soft pressure (which finds form via the computer and digital media) to manage your own time in relationship to broader networks.

The discursive demonstrates a neurotic relationship to the management of time as a negatively activated excess of discussion, discourse, and hanging around. The rise of teamwork and networks is linked to a denial of the location of complex and disturbing old-school production relationships that still exist as a phantom for progressive thinkers. The notion of flexibility within the workplace is a way to encourage people to rationalize their own disappearance or redundancy when necessary. Working situations are not changed—the idea is that YOU have to change.

Maybe we have to think about revised languages of production within the context of self-management. Via small, multiple, flexible groupings, the discursive art context intends to go beyond an echo or a mirroring of simple production relations, though they remain subject to the same complexities that afflict any self-managed environment even when they refuse to create a timetable. As a production cycle rather than a fixed performative moment in time, the discursive uses certain production analogies in relation to what “could be useful” instead of a permanent “association of free(d) time.” 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 simultaneous symptoms and catalysts. It is here that we can build contingent critical structures that critique both modernity and its critical double.

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