

## **Utopia Station**

### **For a ... Functional Utopia**

**Liam Gillick**

**First published as part of Utopia Station, Venice Biennale, 2003**

Over the last few years I have avoided a number of exhibition structures that have used the word 'utopia' as part of their base. The reason for this is connected with my resistance to the misreading of some work now as part of some ineffectual quasi-utopian project or at least a commentary upon a particularly Anglo-Saxon misreading of postmodernism predicated upon an ironic focus on the failure of modernism which renders all progressive thinking as utopian by default. My interest is far more grounded and potentially disappointing than this. And could be described as an ongoing investigation of how the middle ground of social and economic activity leaves traces in our current environment. If we agree that we live in a post-consensus sequence of moments, you might certainly also agree that we live in a post-utopian environment. Throughout, of course, I am glossing over the notion of the rogue individual, the visionary and the baroque dream-scapers. Their apparent 'visions' are retrogressive and not utopian in quality as they are not part of an effective critique of new models. So, if we are working in a post-utopian situation, how are things still agreed, planned and developed and who controls these processes? And if the situation is effectively post-utopian in terms of the absence of functional alternative visions, does the word 'utopian' only exist as an accusatory for cultural workers now. If it is true that there are no functional utopias describable today, what kind of alternative vision can be proposed to the dominant ideologies that control and alienate our relationships and circumstances? The reason for avoiding these prior utopian structures has been connected to my rejection of the assumption that any progressive movement is somehow utopian. My frequent use of the term 'post-utopian' in writing and in relation to my work is an attempt to break free from the application of the word utopia to any old alternative structure that happens to have existed. The left has always been multiple and essentially fractured, the nature of its developed arguments never consolidated or singular. So one question might be – is it necessary to resurrect the notion of a

functional utopia in order to provide a set of rhetorical tools that might help us out of the currently reactive situation we find on the progressive left, or should we keep with a relativist form of multiple interest development that remains mutable, fluctuating, responsive and inclusive.

My last short book was titled *Literally No Place: Communes, Bars and Greenrooms*. It attempted to outline certain narrative structures that might expose the conditions under which we might find ethical and moral traces that resist commodification within our current situation. It is a text that is more focused on the relationship between the urban and rural as they develop under the same cultural conditions, the connection between personal relationship structures within broad battles to control the images that they create and an attempt to look at the particular American development of forms of functional communality in place of the suppression of the legacy and potential of communism and truly alternative structures at an organised and general level. Of course these undercurrents remain deeply embedded within a sequence of narrative texts that present some environments where such play and negotiation might take place. The commune, the bar and the greenroom. The forthcoming French translation of the book will be an unpacking and reworking of the content in collaboration with Philippe Parreno. Through discussions with him over the years, many of the ideas within it have emerged and are only now beginning to develop.

So why would someone change their mind? Why suddenly shift into an association with the word 'utopia' in an art context. If I understand this potential structure – as a participant rather than an organiser – *Utopia Station* appears to be working towards a temporary, if rather visible, marker of a sequence of 'becoming utopias' or 'in relation to the application of the accusation of utopias', rather than a reflection of work that appears to reference a set of aesthetic tools that have been deemed dysfunctional and rendered as ironic failures by the dominant culture's desire to corrupt and prevent through the accusation of hypocrisy and lack of economic realism, yet are still used and passed around as a sad reminder of how good things could have been. A 'Utopia Station', on the other hand, might be an ongoing arrival and departure framed by waiting at an in-between space that has been designated by the organisers. All this combined with something to look at and to pass the time with before moving back into the islands of art that are always presented by the Venice Biennale. Rather than a reflection of flawed social models, it could be a refutation of the accusation of utopia, which is merely one stage, or station in the development of any progressive idea. In order to bypass a

simplistic application and ongoing corruption of the applied meanings of the word 'utopia', the *Utopia Station* might be a call to question whether we are happy with a situation where certain art remains characterised by the phrase: 'it's all very interesting but ... '

This 'becomingness' rather than 'aboutness' is combined with a way of reconfiguring and reassessing the activities of certain artists, critics and curators whose position is hopefully shifting and shimmering under the umbrella of the project. Ironically this *Utopia Station* emerges at a time when the worst predictions from the recent past are playing out. The warnings from those who chose to continue the analysis of social and political conditions in the face of emergent globalisation and the rise of relativism have come true. The apparent utopists were working in the realm of documentary rather than fiction after all. The quasi-rationalisations of neo-liberal thinking are, right now, in full flow. Once again confronting us with a non-choice wrapped in a perversion of moral positioning that renders things binary, unsophisticated and potentially deadly. Anyone opposing both the leaden thinking that emanates from the governments of the US and UK and the too-late manoeuvring and poorly articulated positions of the French, German and Russian governments might be called a fool or worse, a utopian thinker. The use of a baseball bat to destroy a hornets' nest is not a perfect technique at any point, but the fundamental opposition to the entire matrix of value systems that has generated the current international situation, whether in favour or against a war scenario, is generally viewed as an operational system that should be analysed with utopian tools at best, and suppression at worst.

The problem here is linked to the wide-ranging use of the term utopia – the literally no place – in our current language. It is a common enough word so we don't think twice about using it. We tend also to associate it with art and architecture or withdrawal and communality. The developed sense of a word that was originally used to title a book that was intended as a localised critique of a particular historical circumstance has no relation to its original meaning. The question is, how does any consideration of such a term avoid the micro-fascistic traps that lie in wait for anyone who is not convinced that things are the way they could be? In the hands of neo-liberal pragmatists Utopia has come to describe any art movement, architectural moment, political system or communal proposition that doesn't operate within the terms of modern capitalism. Utopian is the term that refers to the desire for something that is impractical, because it levels and implies harmony, while sidestepping the generalised, lurching linearity of the dominant system. The thinking goes that the attempted

application of utopian systems has had to be forced onto people whenever it has been attempted. There has always been a suppression of 'human nature' in order to temporarily experience something more enlightening and less guilt or repression ridden. The strange thing is that the current international tension is between two sets of people who veil their true interests with a faked set of socio-economic anxieties. The religious underpinnings, and therefore essentially utopian, value systems of both parties are dragging us into mire. The question for us is, do we leave this utopian question to these people to fight over and, or do we reclaim it through the use of analytical tools that are more rigorous at identifying the way things work. The question is, can there be a Marxist analysis of utopia that has any functional role within our range of interests. But it is not as simple as this. Moments in the recent past when people have found their own functional utopias have been suppressed and broken down. Other powers are most vigilant when mini-utopian structures emerge and make every effort to point out the apparent hypocrisy in their set ups so as to hasten their demise.

So why use such a flawed dysfunctional, accusational tool for an exhibition title? The question is linked to how to proceed when you are not convinced by current conditions. Working in a relativist, parallel fashion appears to be sufficient at various moments, yet with a continuing proliferation and appropriation of models of radicality by others, it becomes more and more difficult to divine the differences between one named structure and another. It is possible that there is some kind of irony at the heart of its use here. An acknowledgment that the activities of the artists concerned has reached a point of perfect irrelevance. It is arguable that the notion of utopia within the cultural sphere is most attractive to those who have no ongoing interest in making productive change. Instead they create a sequence of mirage visions of how things could be if they were everything other than the way they are now. I would argue that the greatest strength of *Utopia Station* would be derived from its becoming a functional utopia. A model of a more discursive and contingent exhibition structure that could cut free from the generalised experience of the Biennale as a whole and retain a utopian becomingness throughout the time of the exhibition. Scooping up and re-spreading a layer of ethical traces from a sequence of suppressed attempts to actually create a better place and actually have a better time, rather than just providing soothing images of experimental architecture and a mish-mash of interactive structures, however interesting they might be.

How could an exhibition like the one in Venice perform tasks of refusal in relation to the utopian legacy while retaining some reconstituted sense of how things could be. In other words, how could it become a free-floating non-defined sequence of propositions that wander in and out of focus and avoid being lodged within the consumable world of the concept.

'The utopian impulse in thinking is all the stronger, the less it objectifies itself as utopia – a further form of regression – whereby it sabotages its own realisation. Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part, such thinking takes a position as a figuration of praxis, which is more closely related to a praxis truly involved in change than in a position of mere obedience for the sake of praxis. Beyond all specialised and particular content, thinking is actually and above all the force of resistance, alienated from resistance only with great effort.'

\* Theodor W. Adorno, 'Resignation', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998.

© Liam Gillick 2009