

Gillick, Opie, Turnbull (Opie, Gillick)

— Mark Wilsher

Three similar-looking works, covering a span of some thirty-one years from 1967 to 1998. On the surface it seems there is clearly some sort of formal conversation going on between the work of William Turnbull, Julian Opie and Liam Gillick, but how is it to be characterised? Hard, reflective surfaces. Clean lines, straight edges, a minimal aesthetic. All three works appear industrial or at least prefabricated to some degree. This is art as light engineering, perhaps ordered up over the telephone and constructed, or, better, assembled, with a screwdriver and pliers in a tidy, well-ordered workshop. It is cool and distanced and it asks its audience for a cool and distanced response. It is too easy simply to say that one artist has influenced another. What exactly is it that has been passed on, and how are ideas and precedents transformed from generation to generation?

But is there such a teleology to art history? There are too many tributaries, false starts and dead ends to construct any coherent narrative in sculpture. Artists are imprisoned in their own time. The best artists help to shape the future through example, but it is hard to see your own context clearly when you are drowning in it. When Turnbull made *Parallels* (cat. 085) back in 1967, he had only the ideas and precedents of his culture up to and including that actual moment with which to understand what he was doing. Things even looked different the next day when he returned to the studio to take another look at the as yet untitled thing he had left on the floor, since the world now had this new piece of sculpture in it. From today, over forty years later, how do we look at his work? As a historical example of a type of sculpture or a unique thing in itself? That reading is perhaps affected most of all by the work of the artists who have come after him in a similar vein, offering up comparisons and contrasts that suggest not only critiques but also brand-new interpretative possibilities. It is interesting to go back and revisit historical work in the light of the new, because it often turns out to be far richer and more interesting than we, or even the artist, imagined. This is art history written backwards.

To start with the most recent of these three pieces, Liam Gillick's characteristic sculptures made from computer-specified, machine-made components are just one element within the tangled web of his artistic practice. In 1997 Gillick published a book entitled *Discussion Island/Big Conference Centre* that explored the architecture and spatial design of offices and workplaces within the Western information economy. His basic argument is that the ideology behind such ostensibly functional spaces is made manifest and visible in the range of open-plan, hot-desked breakout zones that employees utilise and inhabit. The book and the ideas discussed within it go on to frame various sculptures and gallery installations that act rather like walk-through illustrations for his thesis. Not all his works speak the language of rectilinear minimalism – he might spill glitter on the floor or deploy sugary soft drinks to create a formal counterpoint, and has worked with film and graphic design. But almost all operate in relation to a written text, which inflects them with interesting meanings beyond a straightforward morphological resemblance to minimal sculpture. In this sense they are literary and conceptual, rather than sculptural pieces.

The key thing about this way of working is that it is, in Gillick's word, discursive.¹ Ideas and objects are offered to an audience as prompts for consideration, conversation and action. His whole project is in a sense completely open-ended, and this parallels the way that contemporary global capitalism co-opts indeterminacy as a productive working tool. Management these days is light-touch and paper-thin rather than the traditional heavy-handed pyramid model. Sometimes workers are even encouraged to organise themselves. All of this can be implied by the simple presentation of a sculptural wall or hanging platform that might look like the art of the past, but is very much keyed into contemporary issues.

Fig. 1
Julian Opie (b. 1958), Installation at
the Hayward Gallery, London, 1993
[tbc]



Taking this interpretative model backwards and projecting it onto the work of Julian Opie turns his late 1980s series of cabinets, vents and refrigerator-like forms into meditations on light manufacturing industries. Or rather, the way that commercial forms produced in the name of functionality consciously or unconsciously ape the rational rectilinear language of early Modernism. Michael Newman has noted that many of Opie's characteristic operations involve 'a mimicry of post-industrial modes of production, design and presentation',² and it is true that we might be a little uncertain, just for a few seconds, whether to stand back and admire a work or slide open a panel and reach inside. The functional devices like air vents and display cabinets that Opie echoes in the series from which *W* (1988; cat. 088) is taken might seem at first removed from all aesthetic influence, but these featureless pseudo-objects actually reflect their time and context precisely, the big brash 1980s with their polished surfaces, neon and glass. They might also, perhaps, have been influenced by the return to front-on visibility in that decade, which later peaked with the idea of sculpture as image, as is exemplified by the work of the young British artists. At the time critics tended to emphasise the mute physical presence of Opie's works, with references to the classic minimalist rectangle or cube. But by 1993 Liam Gillick was writing in a magazine review of Opie's Hayward Gallery retrospective (fig. MW1) that 'his work appears to be a reflection on the whole modernist project – not just abstraction and hard-edged objects, but cultural and socio-political aspects expressed through lucid manipulation of forms'.³ There is clearly an interesting artistic conversation starting to develop here.⁴

So would it be wrong to understand Opie's piece as being concerned with the politics of the late 1980s, which treated everyone as a potential industrial resource? And how were those ideologies expressed visually, through form? Perhaps through the use of hard-wearing metals, wipe-clean plastics, monochrome colour palettes and hermetically sealed finishes. Thus the spirit of utopian rectilinear Modernism is reborn as efficient light-industrial design. It is interesting that this phase of Opie's work, for me one of his most intriguing moments, is exactly when he appears less enthralled by the possibilities of the contemporary and more drawn to its contradictions.

This way of retrospectively reinterpreting artworks in the light of those that they themselves have influenced is a potentially endless game. How does it affect the work at the start of this chain? *Parallels* now sits in the galleries of the Royal Academy, not on his studio floor, and represents the artist William Turnbull in this large, trans-historical exhibition of sculpture. Is it at all possible to see it as he must originally have seen it, as a reflection of 'the intense reality of the materials and forms that pre-exist in the culture

and environment in which he works?⁵ It comes at the start of his late-career phase, during which he used largely unmanipulated industrial materials, in an apparent break from his earlier sculpted and heavily textured works, although the simplicity and symmetry are still there. At the time, Turnbull and artists like him were much preoccupied with questions of process that were understood to link directly to ‘the common forms, activities and exigencies of everyday life.’⁶ By leaving his materials largely as he found them he was able to refer to the outside influences that delimited their existence – the standard dimensions of a U-beam, the thickness of the steel, the techniques of commercial fabrication and construction. These almost ethical questions he weighed equally alongside more sculptural concerns about horizontality, composition and repetition. Would he have been considering the role of heavy industry in late 1960s Britain? Seen through the lens of Gillick’s theoretical discourse, Turnbull’s interest in the activities of everyday life takes on a more sharply articulated focus towards labour relations, factory production and the newly nationalised British Steel Corporation (fig. MW2).⁷

The traditional art-historical narrative would locate a piece like this in terms of international developments. ‘British minimalism’ was an empirical and typically hands-on interpretation of American minimalist sculpture, which is tautologically imagined today in terms of both pure bodily experience and abstract, conceptual rule-following. Sculptures were on the one hand easily reducible to a set of dimensions or instructions for fabrication (they had ‘minimal’ art content), while on the other, their interest was said to lie in the viewer’s experience of real space and real time, heightened by the sculpture as a kind of reference point. British minimalism often displayed an additional interest in the sensuous qualities of raw materials themselves. The minimal ‘look’ could obviously be made to serve many different purposes.

By the time Julian Opie started at Goldsmith’s School of Art in 1979 the complexities and tensions of minimalism had started to smooth themselves out and the provocatively blank box form had become first and foremost an artistic precedent. The range of permissible forms and finishes for sculpture had been extended. But just as importantly, the visual vocabulary of the audience had been extended too. It is the existence of the idea of minimalism in the culture that allows Opie’s cabinets to operate as legible artworks, by way of their reference to featureless boxes. Without that precedent they are simply empty display cases. Liam Gillick’s work utilises the same reference, pastiching the morphology of high minimalism even more closely with his modular steel structures and featureless panels. But his consummate postmodern performance turns this superficially retro look inside out, and it becomes instead a commentary on the visual representation of modernist paradigms – another version of the trickle of influence from one generation to another, the standard avant-garde development of visual language and its



Fig. 2
British Steel Corporation: view of the plant [tbc]



Fig. 3
Needs caption

interpretation by subsequent generations.

A third narrative of influence goes something like this. Turnbull lived in Paris from 1948 to 1950, where he mixed with the European avant-garde, meeting Brancusi, Tzara and Giacometti. He was part of the generation of sculptors whose careers straddled a paradigm shift in twentieth-century art: from the making of expressive and sometimes symbolic forms that were thought to draw on universal visual archetypes, to embracing the material stuff of the world around them as a reflection of the contingency of the contemporary. It was the postwar generation who invented the shapes, textures and materials of modernism, giving concrete form to idealism and dreaming up the look of the modern world, from minimalism to wipe-clean surfaces. Turnbull was aware that the look of Modernism is just that, a look, because he contributed to its articulation through his mature work.

By the 1980s the look of modernism has been thoroughly assimilated and postmodernism is in full swing. Julian Opie finds inspiration in motorways, tower blocks and mass production, and his work can be described as ‘a narrative of reflective responses to the experience of Modernity.’⁸ It reflects the world from a distanced but essentially uncynical view, and takes the forms of industrial production as a readymade vocabulary to be utilised fairly unproblematically.

By 1998, the year of Gillick’s *Big Conference Platform Platform* (cat. 090), the world has changed immeasurably. Manufacturing industry has migrated to cheaper territories, the economy is based on providing services and, latterly, information itself is commodified and capitalised. The look of modernism is now a piece of history that can be seen to embody ideological beliefs about progress and rationality. It can be used in order to talk about the ‘grey areas of think-tanks, strategy, compromise and renovation’⁹ where such values are tested and interrogated. Its meaning is utterly different in today’s context, in the light of what we have learnt since 1967. This is true of all art, which changes in the light of subsequent works, and remains always contemporary in relation to the shifting contingencies of the surrounding world.