

Curator Dieter Roelstraete on Liam Gillick and Lawrence Weiner in M HKA Antwerp

## ‘DARING, RADICAL AND IMMERSIVE’

On a bitter cold winter's day, a tall unkempt man with a pair of dark-rimmed glasses walks into Berlin's Victoria Bar. It's Dieter Roelstraete, an editor of 'Afterall' – one of the art world's most respected art magazines – and curator at Antwerp's M HKA. Outside it's 10 below zero, but a Negroni and a Whiskey Sour quickly warm up a conversation about his latest project, 'A Syntax of Dependency', the upcoming exhibition with Liam Gillick and Lawrence Weiner entitled at the M HKA. Opening on 4 February 2011.

David ULRICHS

Welcome to the interview from Berlin – don't worry this is not going hurt!

**Dieter Roelstraete:** “I hope not. You know, I have been sworn to secrecy by the artists not to say too much about the exhibition before it opens...”

Actually, I remember introducing myself to you for the very first time as you came out of an exhibition at Galerie Esther Schipper at the time of the 2010 Berlin Biennial – and she was showing a solo exhibition of work by Liam Gillick!

**Roelstraete:** “Oh yes, I remember that...”

Obviously, that was not a coincidence. You were probably in the middle of organizing the exhibition that is now opening at the M HKA, the show with Liam Gillick and Lawrence Wiener, 'A Syntax of Dependency'.

**Roelstraete:** “Well, actually by that time most of my work had already been done.”

A simple Google-search of the two artists names threw up the title of a book they co-authored entitled 'Between Artists', which is sadly out of print. Is there is some connection? Was this what sparked the idea to bring these two artists together?

**Roelstraete:** “Well, it's a known fact that Liam is important for Lawrence and vice-versa, but in 2006 they published the little booklet you mentioned. At the end of the book, which is a dialogue between the two of them, Lawrence remarks that they both have embarked on a ton of projects together, without any of them ever coming to fruition. Liam responds that this very fact in itself is interesting. So this is what triggered my interest. I thought that this is a perfect basis for an exhibition together.”

So you set out to destroy the meaning of this last sentence or add a footnote to the book. What can we expect? Is this a side-by-side of two retrospective exhibitions?

**Roelstraete:** “No, not at all. It's a joint venture and the hardest part was to find a way in which both artists could express themselves together...”

...univocally?

**Roelstraete:** “Let's call it polyphonic and unisono. The M HKA has a solid reputation of putting on thematic or geographically oriented group shows. In the last few years there have been very few solo exhibitions or retrospectives, but we didn't just want to put on a solo exhibition...”

You wanted something in between?

**Roelstraete:** “Yes, but in the beginning I brief-

ly entertained the idea of a retrospective show, which would have been very practical since quite a bit of Liam's work is in collections in Europe and Lawrence started his career in Europe here with a strong connection to Belgian art.”

So, bringing these works together would have been your job.

**Roelstraete:** “...the traditional job of a curator.”

But then you changed your mind?

**Roelstraete:** “Both artists have been visible in recent years on the European art scene with retrospectives, so we went for something different.”

Both Liam and Lawrence work conceptually, do you think we are experiencing a revival in conceptual art in these economically challenging times?

**Roelstraete:** “Well, ever since conceptual art emerged as a 'movement' of its own in the late sixties, you could say that there hasn't really been any other art since. Of course, there have been occasional returns to painting and sculpture, which you could call pre-conceptual rather than post-conceptual, but these do not really constitute the mainstream of art production. And I do feel there are a lot of young artists today who work with language and the written word.”

So what about the title of the exhibition, 'A Syntax of Dependency', which is already quite cryptic, even without the colon at the end...

**Roelstraete:** “...ahh, the colon is very deliberate. It refers to the punctuation used in dialogue, and dialogue is always open-ended. It's never finished.”

...and we are talking about syntax here, not semantics, so it has nothing to do with meaning?

**Roelstraete:** “Exactly, this is a very important distinction. Syntax predetermines semantics, in that the latter studies the processes of signification and making meaning...”

...the production of meaning?

**Roelstraete:** “Yes, and syntax operates on a lower level. It studies the order of words, which allows for signification to take place at all. Language is like a set of building blocks and syntax is there to arrange these on a table. So there is an implication of materialism in the choice of syntax above semantics, and for someone like Liam Gillick material is of course extremely important.”

So, we will see a special material being used in this exhibition?

**Roelstraete:** “Yes. Most artists obsess about materials, but while I can appreciate this fascination, I myself prefer to operate on the semantic side of things.”

What is this exhibition about? Will we see some kind of word sculpture?

**Roelstraete:** “Well, it's obviously going to contain sculptural as well as written parts, that's simply in the nature of the way these artists work. But the title hints at something else. Namely, that they depend on one another – which is an interesting way to define the nature of their relationship...”

So, Liam doesn't look up to Lawrence?

**Roelstraete:** “Of course there is a generational divide. Yet in many ways this project is precisely directed at undermining this hierarchy. There is a leveling of this hierarchy with both artists operating on the same level...”

So a kind of horizontalisation takes place in this exhibition. It will not be a master-student show?

**Roelstraete:** “No, not at all.”

Ok. To recap: the exhibition will include writing and sculpture and the artists will work with a special material that they have never worked with before... Do you think visitors will understand the show?

**Roelstraete:** “Well, it will be spectacular – and I'm fully aware of the problematic associations of that term. And it will be beautiful – Liam certainly understands beauty.”

So, it will be aesthetically pleasing...

**Roelstraete:** “It has an immersive quality, which makes it an experience and not really a matter of merely 'understanding' what's on view.”

Doesn't this somehow contradict what we usually expect conceptual art to demand from us?

**Roelstraete:** “I guess it will be a little bit different, but I think it's quite a good demonstration of what they think of their relationship. And in any case I don't think 'concept' and 'spectacle' – or 'aesthetics' – contradict each other so clearly.”

Other curators seem to cast aside the artist's intentions and do whatever they want with the work. The curator has something to say and instrumentalizes the artists or artworks to make his statement. Of course when someone doesn't have much to say, but insists on using the art idiosyncratically, you get a really bad show...

**Roelstraete:** “Well, I'm interested in making sure that the artist is happy first and foremost.”

What about the audience?

**Roelstraete:** “Isn't the artist part of the audience? I'm inclined to believe that if the artist is happy, the audience will also be happy.”

I see. With even having seen the exhibition, it seems to me that you perhaps have a lot of respect for these two artists, perhaps too much to be able to use them to make your own statement.

**Roelstraete:** “It's definitely not easy. They are both older than me and senior figures in the art world, so it is a little bit difficult to shake off the awe and respect I have for both of these artists.”

I understand, but what makes a great curator?

**Roelstraete:** “I never studied curating, I kind of stumbled into it and I don't identify with it so much. I don't belong to the line of curators like, say, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Jens Hoffmann, who identify very strongly with this occupation. I still



DIETER ROELSTRAETE (FOTO: NADINE DINTER)

see myself first and foremost as a writer and therefore often tend to think of my exhibitions as kind of essays...”

What was the idea behind this show, or was it just about bringing these two guys together?

**Roelstraete:** “It was really also about dialogue. At M HKA we are not so much interested in the standardized model of the solo exhibition; in this case we really wanted to bring together two artists, who have worked with each other but never actually put on a show together. I see this as a great chance to give space for a dialogue-type exhibition. Dialogue is a basic tool for every curator, because what else is a curator, but someone who listens and talks to artists?”

Where does that leave the viewer?

**Roelstraete:** “Once again, I think the exhibition will be quite spectacular; it will be like walking into a work of art. Now of course when I say the exhibition will be immersive, I am aware of the problems that come with such a statement, especially with its connection to relational aesthetics.”

Sounds like you are criticizing your own exhibition.

**Roelstraete:** “I'm always critical of the shows I curate! But then again I'm quite excited about the idea that someone in Stockholm, Rome or Riga maybe saying to themselves: 'Finally, a show with Weiner and Gillick', jump on an airplane and come to Antwerp to see the exhibition. But with such a daring and radical show, there is a possibility that they will be, well, somewhat disappointed.”

But that is always a possibility.

**Roelstraete:** “Yes, but this show really is quite radical.”

Unique, radical and immersive – sounds like a blurb from the back of a book jacket!

**Roelstraete:** “In any case it is an interesting challenge to try and make an exhibition of those two artists with a broad aesthetic appeal – they're not known to be making the most readily accessible artwork...”

'A Syntax of Dependency', exhibition with Liam Gillick and Lawrence Weiner entitled at the M HKA Antwerp. Opening on 4 February 2011. www.muhka.be



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