



Well, the beer is cold, isn't it
Today is the day to deliver a
message. The lights on the beamer ON?

Hi there

for fuck's sake,
Somebody is watching

Yeah, that's me

I cant stand this!

Any journalists
coming?

Aber der Beamer
funktioniert doch!

dont tell anyone about

is the beer cold?

The Central
Kowloon

Functional Configurations: Eastside Projects as a Play in Eight Acts

SYNOPSIS

Eastside Projects is an artist-run space, a public gallery for the city of Birmingham. It is organized by its founding collective comprising Simon and Tom Bloor, Céline Condorelli, Ruth Claxton, James Langdon, and Gavin Wade. It first opened to the public in September 2008. Starting in 2003, Condorelli and Wade developed the evolving, collaborative project *Support Structure*, which aims to create spaces and situations that are continuously reinvented by their users in relation to its context. The initial setup of Eastside Projects formed *Support Structure's* eighth phase, “In Support of Public,” and included the renovation and architecture of the building and the spatial strategy of the gallery; the renovation continued through the first exhibition, *This Is the Gallery and the Gallery Is Many Things*. This setup is considered as a starting point, rather than an end result, of how the space appears and what it consists of, and marked the beginning of a spatial evolution as a developing, open-ended exhibition. The gallery is an evolving collective artwork.

Eastside Projects was founded with an explicit position in relation to its function within the context of art production and the role art may have in society at large. Additionally, the gallery began with a few operative policies to be built upon:

1. **Expanded program:** Eastside Projects considers design, organizational structures, and architecture to be an integral part of its program.
2. **Continuous evolution:** each aspect of the gallery is in process and constant evolution.
3. **Cumulative space:** work may remain; exhibitions leave traces and become existing conditions for the next works to take place in.

CAST

The cast consists of some of the numerous voices that are part of thinking through and developing Eastside Projects' spatial conditions. Some of these voices belong to the directors and artists that have been physically present in the space and worked in it; others are those of people who may never have been inside the gallery, but who provided important insights in dialogues elsewhere; and finally some are the essential voices of inspirational thinkers from the past, that populate our thoughts and conversations and are, in this way, also present.

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

Walter Benjamin, Intellectual, philosopher, sociologist, literary critic, translator, and essayist (July 15, 1892–September 27, 1940)

Céline Condorelli, Founding director of Eastside Projects

Gavin Wade, Founding director and curator of Eastside Projects

The Director, A character in A “Volvo” Bar, a play by Liam Gillick (staged at Eastside Projects from November 27, 2009 to January 23, 2010)

El Lissitzky, artist, designer, photographer, typographer, polemicist, and architect (November 23, 1890–December 30, 1941)

Peter Nadin, Artist and founder of the Peter Nadin Gallery (New York, 1979–1980)

Peter Fend, Artist and co-founder of the Offices of Peter Fend, Coleen Fitzgibbon, Jenny Holzer, Peter Nadin, Richard Prince & Robin Winters (New York, 1979) and Ocean Earth (New York, 1994).

Henrik Schrat, Artist

Mary Anne Staniszewski, writer, editor, collaborative curator, and professor

Stuart Whipps, Artist and ongoing archival photographer of Eastside Projects

NOTES

- 1—Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, New Left Review 1, no. 62 (July–August 1970): 1.
- 2—An artwork by Heather and Ivan Morrison from 2007, serving as Eastside Projects’ office, kitchen, and bar.
- 3—Céline Condorelli and Gavin Wade, Skype conversation, August 28 and 30, 2010.
- 4—Liam Gillick, *A “Volvo” Bar* (Birmingham: Eastside Projects Publications, 2009).



ACT 1

Location: Manifesta 8, Murcia, Spain

Walter Benjamin: *Namely, instead of asking: what is the relationship of a work of art to the relationships of production of the time? Is it in accord with them, is it reactionary or does it strive to overthrow them, is it revolutionary?—in place of this question, or in any case before asking this question, I would like to propose another. Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation to the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand in them? This question aims directly at the function that the work has within the literary relationships of production of a period.*¹

ACT 2

Location: Pleasure Island²

Céline Condorelli: The story starts with the question: what should a gallery be and how should it work? And we came up with the idea of a cumulative gallery.

Gavin Wade: We were immediately interested in the gallery as a cumulative environment, a space to be constructed over time; we weren't going to make something that would just be ready to go and stay that way forever. Our alteration to the space could only be the beginning, getting the trajectory that Liam Gillick mentions going.³

The Director: *Maybe we're trying to catch a moment, maybe an earlier moment, maybe it's a Volvo moment, 17th of June, 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, everything is a trajectory as long as we can keep it this way.*⁴

Wade: Putting the founding collective together is right at the start of that, and then we can start thinking how—now that we have proposed a space where we can make art—should we configure it each time, how should we propose that it comes into being? Our first exhibition, *This Is*



the Gallery and the Gallery Is Many Things is explicit about being an evolution, and inviting individuals to enter and alter that context. So that a number of different individuals overlap and share time, responding to what has happened beforehand, anticipating what might come next.

Peter Nadin: We told them to do whatever they wanted, the idea being that there would be a succession of exchanges or interactions between people, between artists. The gallery situation at the time seemed silly in a sense: why does everything always leave every month? What is it with the monthly cycle, of putting up work, taking it down, putting it up. . . . Why not leave it there, and just put some other stuff in there? What is the need for this false sense of erasure?⁵

Condorelli: And within the first year we had *Abstract Cabinet Show*—El Lissitzky’s *Abstract Cabinet* had been an important element in the setting-up of the gallery, of an exhibition as an artwork in and of itself. It positions container and context as sites of production, as working sites, while claiming the status of artwork.

Wade: Lissitzky had made something that was very unique and impossible to ignore, which is what attracted us to it in the first place, something so explicitly self-aware.

El Lissitzky: *Great international exhibitions resemble zoos, where visitors are roared at by a thousand different beasts at the same time. In the gallery the objects should not all suddenly attack the viewer. If on previous occasions in his march past in front of the picture walls and object rooms, he was lulled by painting into a certain passivity, now exhibition spaces should make the man active. This should be the purpose of the gallery.*⁶

Condorelli: Yes, you really put the space itself in the foreground, which motivated us to work against any notion of neutrality or providing a background. It is important to us to create an active space, a space that activates. The other notion from the setup of the gallery was of a space working cumulatively, an idea that comes directly from Peter Nadin’s Gallery in New York in 1979. This aspect, and the exhibition as art-

5—Céline Condorelli and Peter Nadin, conversation at Nadin’s home in Lower Manhattan, July 12, 2009.
6—El Lissitzky, “Exhibition Rooms,” in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 365–66.

7—Condorelli and Nadin.
 8—El Lissitzky, *Abstract Cabinet*, Dresden and Hannover, 1926–1928. Lissitzky developed radical new environments, rooms as artworks, containing works by other artists including Naum Gabo, Francis Picabia, László Moholy-Nagy, Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso, Fernand Leger, Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters, and Alexander Archipenko.



work, creates a context where each show is an invitation to alter the space, but the space is also an archive of its own history. In this way, the default position of the gallery is exactly its capacity for buildup, which meant not starting from a white cube but from a cumulative, and therefore potentially confusing, space.

Nadin: But walls don't stay as walls, things happen to them, things are put on them. So why not let the thing evolve, let it continue, and see what happens?⁷

Wade: The materials the gallery is made of express that, so for example the scaffolding wall in the space declares conditions of change, transformation, and temporariness. You could argue that as a default position it is fixed as well, but it is one of a wish to change, encouraging adjustment and intervention—a very open sense of what a default setting might be.

Condorelli: Using scaffolding both inside and outside acts as a declaration of the whole site being a building site, and therefore, a site in flux. Once that is the existing condition that artists are invited to work with, it becomes an invitation to alter the space without feeling it is in any way precious, to change it in a way that could itself continuously change.

ACT 3

Location: Abstract Cabinet⁸

Wade: In most galleries so much importance is put on creating a hallowed space for the next exhibition, making a force field of protection around the gallery that distinguishes it from the rest of the world. It's a funny thing to change a space only to make a protected environment for the next person to come along—it seems incredibly perverse and I think if you do that continuously, you just get gallery fatigue, you begin to understand too much what that gallery is made of and this no longer has any meaning. The question for us would be whether there is also a fatigue of endless possibilities, of change and transformation.



Lissitzky: *The equilibrium which one seeks to attain in the gallery must be elementary and capable of change. It must acknowledge and work with existing conditions, social, spatial, political. The light, in which the effect of colour originates, should be controlled. Colour is an epidermis covering a skeleton. According to the construction of each skeleton, the epidermis is pure colour or tone. Each demands a different manner of isolation and illumination. Just as the best acoustics are created for the concert-hall, so must the best conditions be created for the show-room, so that all the works may achieve the same degree of activity. But gallery-space is not there for the eyes alone, it is not a picture; it must be lived in. The Gallery is there for the human being—not the human being for the room.*⁹

9—Lissitzky, “Exhibition Rooms,” 365–66.

Condorelli: Is that a way of making exhibitions that are close to art production itself?

Wade: The only thing that would be valid to me is to think of those exhibitions as a way of making art.

Condorelli: So we are arguing for a position of integration of the processes of production.

Wade: We choose notions that we are going to analyze across a long period of time, and these are the structure that produces material in the space: a system that could be seen as a curatorial approach which in turn makes a space in which things occur. So is that what the curator is producing? A framework active and sensitive enough for other people to work within? Or on top of? With, rather than against? Or with and against at the same time, in a critical partnership?

Condorelli: In that sense the curator becomes one of the producers. The structure, the organization itself, is also one, with the artists and different kinds of authors entering the space, taking part in its larger cultural production.

Wade: And we have to make sure that this is an exchange, a dialogue; to propose things and construct them to have effects, and to produce other things we are affected by in return. Our structure needs to change according to how

10—Ibid., 365–66.
 11—Céline
 Condorelli and
 Peter Fend, email
 exchange, October
 2008–May 2009.



people use the space. It is our real intention to try and build in this way.

ACT 4
Location: Studio,
Berlin

Condorelli: Initially we also needed things like a bathroom and a front door. Now, we are mostly trying to think of change through new exhibitions and their sets of possibilities for display. These new spatial configurations can then be considered as the new existing conditions of the gallery, so that for the following show, some things might be removed, other things might be added, and some things might just be taken for granted because they'll be there.

Lissitzky: *New inventions, which enable us to move about in space in new ways and at new speeds, will bring about a new reality. The static architecture of the Egyptian pyramids has been superseded—our architecture revolves, swims, flies.*¹⁰

Wade: We need to develop exhibitions that allow a clear use of the space that isn't satisfied yet. It's really special being able to think about making Carey Young's show and imagining Dan Graham's show after that, and about the two not being separate entities. And even the show after those, which is potentially *Narrative Show*, as being formed by decisions made in the previous two. That is when I think exhibitions then become much more of a section of life: you can experience them and see continuity, things don't just stop or start.

Peter Fend: And it was more or less an aesthetic exercise in what to think about space. . . . Where space in this case is a solid, is a gas, is elastic; it can be inflated, it can be contracted; it's in your body, you're inside the space. It was actually quite important that something had happened to the walls, that something was happening to the space. . . . The space has already been somehow "occupied," and what you do becomes an additional occupation practice.¹¹

Condorelli: I suppose the space also acts as a growing archive of its own production and evo-



lution. There was an interesting point for me in *Curtain Show* and the installing of Tacita Dean's work, *Darmstadter Werkblock*, when her assistant could not understand why the wall was the way it was. The wall was constructed of fragments of Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan's artwork — *Does your contemplation of the situation fuck with the flow of circulation*, and DJ Simpson's wallpaper work — *Disc 001 Real Grey* from *Abstract Cabinet Show*, and it was difficult to explain how while being the remainder of an artwork, it was also part of the gallery and the existing conditions that we wanted Tacita's film to work within. Once it was clear that there was a congruent relationship between the space and the subject matter in Tacita's own film of the relationship between Joseph Beuys's work and the space it existed within, he was happy with it, and didn't even want to paint over other areas we thought could be fixed up! People seem to need to create a difference between what is considered artwork and what is not, as if the gallery context itself was not work and could be ignored. As if something like *Pleasure Island* was something you could ignore, while of course it is in every single one of our exhibitions. It is difficult to explain until people come to Eastside Projects; the space just makes sense when you are part of it. Perhaps this is because it is so far from a white cube, and all the layers of the making of the space are apparent and overlaid, making it too complex to read from a distance.

Wade: You always have to communicate, but in a way it is more interesting if the space itself poses the questions.

Lissitzky: *We are approaching the state of floating in air and swinging like a pendulum. I want to help discover and mould the form of this reality.*¹²

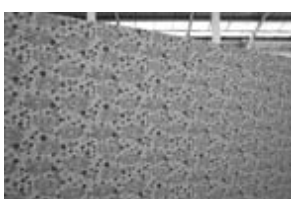
ACT 5

**Location: Eastside Projects,
Birmingham**

Condorelli: Exhibition making is probably the only context where display is explicitly the main subject one is working with. Display is of course very important in politics or the super-market, but it's not in the foreground, while in

12—Lissitzky, "Exhibition Rooms," 365–66.

13—Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).



the space of exhibitions, you can put attention on display itself as the site for work.

Wade: There is a sort of stripping down, getting down to the structure of building something up. I wonder whether the neutral position is actually meant to be a stripping down to the bare bones of what you require to make something. The white cube is not that, but it is an image of it.

Mary Anne Staniszewski: *One wonders why exhibition design's variety of means and powers of communication have been collectively forgotten, for the most part, by the art historical and museum establishment in the United States.*¹³

Condorelli: It takes a lot of work to make a white cube, all that blankness ... so those bare bones are more complex than they seem. The white cube conceals what it is made of in order to appear like a paired down structure.

Wade: The complexity and messiness of Eastside Projects come from making things come together and cross over, so you see quite a few layers at the same time, including the supports. We want to share the space. Maybe it comes down to our intention. That may be why the Eastside Projects manual is important: it introduces the space, but can never give it all away. It can just give pointers in how to use it, how to experience projects, or, for artists, how to work with it. It comes down to language versus form, to not wanting to use language as the tool to interpret, but for the space to force people to move and question what's going on in there. And it is difficult—it makes people feel awkward. That might be part of what our mission is here, to try and not compromise the nature of the artworks by offering too many layers of interpretation, while nurturing the depths of what the artists hope for through their artwork. Maybe what is interesting about Eastside Projects is that it is a place formed by and through activities of artists that also host a lot of activity by artists. Maybe it comes down to just trying to make a unique place.

14—Gillick, A
“Volvo” Bar.

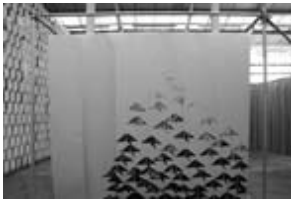
ACT 6

**Location: Eastside,
Birmingham**

The Director: *At the heart of all this is a re-examination 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. 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 bar in the middle of nowhere, with nothing to listen to, and everyone waiting for the arrival of the “soft” future.*¹⁴

Condorelli: Why is it that libraries never host book production? A lot of writers go there to research and write texts, but no books are published in libraries, just as probably no consumables are made shopping malls, and nothing that gets sold in supermarkets actually gets made in supermarkets. . . . If we use this to think about what we are trying to do with Eastside Projects, we want it as a place that hosts artists, art production, *and* its distribution. This is like writers being invited to the library to make books that are printed there and then put on the shelves. An art space being cumulative and hosting production is also one way of thinking about legacy and duration. What is the validity of making exhibitions today, and can we make exhibitions that are of their time? What is the role of exhibition making as opposed to just art making?

Lissitzky, voiced by Wade: *The Abstract Cabinet, as it has become known, is here for the expansion of the human being and the human being’s environment. This new incarnation then expands on my original ideas of expansion. If we walk, we walk faster and further. If we fly, we fly with more grace and more purpose. If we define the super structure of our environment through responses to synergetic spheres of contextual influence then we have to take on board the complexity of fluctuations in our reality findings as opposed to our speculative projections. In between we discover, nurture and utilize a new public sphere. This is*



15—El Lissitzky, voiced by artists of *Abstract Cabinet Show*, interview by Gavin Wade via email, September 7–20, 2010. Gavin Wade, “Abstract Cabinet Interview,” in *Abstract Cabinet Show* (Birmingham: Eastside Projects Publications, 2009).



*the Abstract Cabinet’s purpose, and it only becomes more clear as we try to keep up with the ecological deviations of a strained society. This Abstract Cabinet bursts at the seams in honour and contradiction of a past yearning for equilibrium. Equilibrium is no longer our goal. Instead the portability of our avatar-like beings through the reconstituted technological super-complex leads us to skip from equilibrium to overload. Through understandings of imbalance, and overlaps of being, our energies can be concentrated towards new modes of reflection, expression and above all Revolution.*¹⁵

Wade: I think this is what exhibition making should be really, a challenging of what it means to produce these structures, just as artists challenge ways of making artworks. How can we add to the situation when there has been so much examination of institutional setups and supports and thinking of exhibitions as sites of production, from the 1970s to the late 1990s? Since then, there have been spaces that tried to break down the flow of the exhibition program, such as Maria Lind at Munich Kunstverein, which features a show lasting a year while other artists come in and out, working over different periods of time so that the whole space of the exhibition becomes an interrelated set of stages. If we are going to make exhibitions now, they should reflect the idea of learning things along the way and reclaim display, which is such a key element of our society. I wonder whether art still has a claim on display, outside of the commercialization of looking, receiving, and communicating? There are not many sites that still question that. How do you make exhibitions that stand up against Twitter, as a contemporary form? But this brings up the difference between a gallery and language again. Language can describe a spatial, cumulative, and phenomenological environment and all the art-works that exist within these parameters. At a certain point in describing it an element of fiction comes in. We’ve become very interested in fictionalizing, in creating a play of the actual events that go on here, because it might be closer to the real experience of the space.

Lissitzky: *To create functional art is to concentrate all the elements of modern knowledge, all*



existing systems and methods, and with these to form plastic elements, which from then on exist just like the elements of nature, such as H (hydrogen) and O (oxygen). The creator of functional art amalgamates these elements and obtains acids which bite into everything they touch, that is to say, they have an effect on all spheres of life. Perhaps all this is a piece of laboratory work: but it does not produce any scientific preparations which are only interesting and intelligible to a small circle of specialists. It produces living bodies, objects of a specific kind, new relationships and connections, new forms of knowledge, whose effects cannot be measured with an ammeter or a mano-meter.¹⁶

16—Lissitzky, "Exhibition Rooms," 365–66.

Condorelli: Perhaps fiction allows a different kind of feedback, as a mechanism. It can host the different conversations and dialogues that take place, with artists and people who have been gone a long time, and to do so simultaneously—like they do in our heads. So many different voices are present when we talk together, but it is only the device of fiction that can contain them comfortably.

Wade: Henrik Schrat's and your comic brought back this idea of how to question and interpret the life of the space with a science-fiction story that starts in the gallery. Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan approached it in a similar way. They needed to come up with a way of positioning themselves in relation to the gallery, which was already adopting a stance similar to theirs as artists, and find a way to question and clarify our own function and method of working. So they had to embed themselves in it in a different way by turning the conversation between them and us into a play and have it acted out by us playing ourselves. And that made me want to pick this up with Liam Gillick's plays. By now Eastside Projects is not so much a physical building up, joining together, and combining of elements, but about understanding the narrative that's flowing through the space. And it is exciting to imagine doing a *Narrative Show* highlighting this idea further. Perhaps other narratives could link up and be developed from this main one into many strands, stories, and functions.

17—El Lissitzky, voiced by artists of *Abstract Cabinet Show*, interview by Gavin Wade via email, September 7–20, 2010.
18 Gillick, A “Volvo” Bar.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Comic Page 84 and 97:
Céline Condorelli & Henrik Schrat, *Strati, Hopfl, Monthoux and the Seventeenth Plan, One-Day-Comic, EP9*, published by Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 2008

Fixed Position
Installation views of Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 2008– 2010: *This Is The Gallery and The Gallery Is Many Things* 2008, Shezad Dawood / Henrik Schrat 2008, Simon & Tom Bloor: *As Long As It Lasts* 2009, Sculpture Show 2009, Joanne Tatham & Tom O’Sullivan: *Does Your Contemplation of the Situation Fuck With the Flow of Circulation* 2009, Abstract Cabinet Show 2009, Liam Gillick: *Two Short Plays* 2009, *Curtain Show* 2010, *Book Show* 2010.
Photo Stuart Whipps



Condorelli, quoting Wade: Are you suggesting that we are all puppets acting under some misguided masters directions?

Lissitzky, voiced by Heather and Ivan Morison: *No. The world is understood through myths. All meaning comes to us as stories. We can take control of these stories to create our own meaning and form new myths. The midden is the detritus of society and we sit upon it, pick things from it, re-mould them and model them into objects that can act out new histories and possible futures.*¹⁷

Condorelli: Using fiction is liberating. Whatever is happening with the space can be considered one of the possible stories that could take place, and the characters that appear can come in and out like in so many scenes. This might be a way to structure this essay. Someone like El Lissitzky is a very important voice in the making of Eastside Projects, as are some of the artists that have shown here. Your voice is almost constant, and Ruth Claxton’s and James Langdon’s are very present, Simon Bloor’s, Tom Bloor’s, and mine come in and out. That’s quite a nice way of thinking of Eastside Projects over time, as a play that just carries on, and each show a particular scene...

Wade: It could become a script that’s never acted, while what’s performed in the space is definitely one amongst a possible set of choices that the space produces.

ACT 7
Location: Volvo Bar

The Director: *How about that. I always wanted my own bar. We have created the conditions for the experimental, but no actual experiments and vice-versa. Micro-communities of redundancy have joined together playing with the difference between art time and work time.*¹⁸ ■

