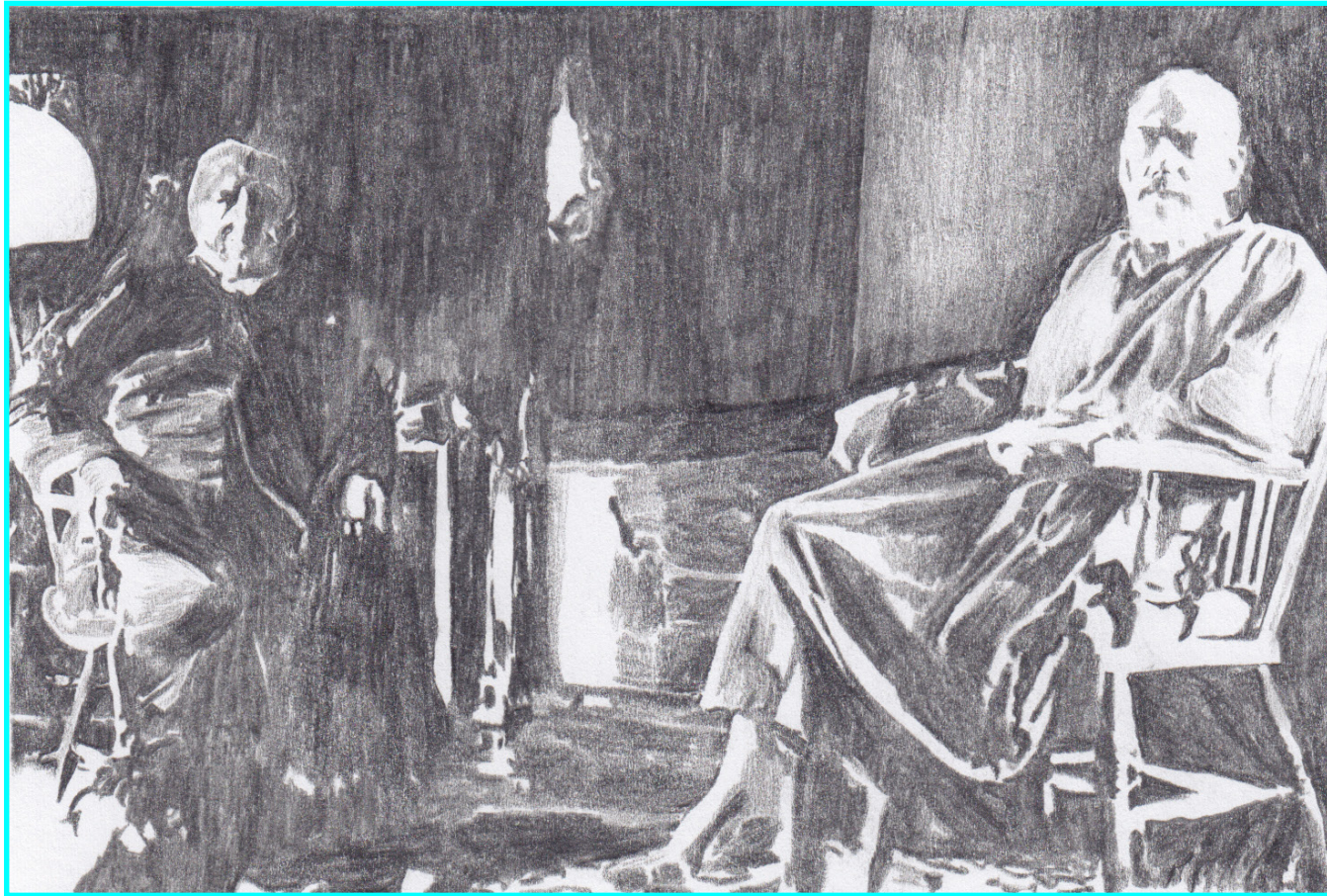


Eric Gill Meets the Bijlmer

On Memories

A conversation between R'm Aharoni and Eric Gill



Amsterdam November 2015

This is real. Between August and November 2015 I was hosted at the BijlmerAIR program, in Amsterdam. The program offers international artists the opportunity to work within the context of the Bijlmer area – an area known as isolated and departed from the ‘true’ Amsterdam. It is the home of many ‘outsiders’ mainly Surinamese, Indians, Africans, Moroccans. Already when I came to inspect the area before applying for the artist-program, the place seemed warm and welcoming. I was struck with the multilingual, the international faces, the colorful people.

The application committee of the program asked to know what subject/aspect will the artist explore in the Bijlmer or of the Bijlmer. What should the outsider-artist want to create from the experience of living for few months in this peculiar place? My intention was slightly different. In reality I had not worked from the resources of the Bijlmer within, but with an external resource. Instead of utilizing something from inside the area, I proposed to import something from outside. This something was actually someone – the English artist Eric Gill, in spirit.

Mr. Gill could not attend and stay in with me for the couple of months I worked on the project, nor could it be comfortable for us two in a studio apartment. But I had made already then, the promise to myself more than to him, that we would find time to sit in four eyes and discuss the project that related to his philosophy on Isolation.

On November 17th 2015, I met Gill in the Centrum voor Beeldende Kunst, Zuidoost in the Bijlmer. I had finally the opportunity to show him the result of my project, and to conduct the conversation which is brought here. Except for my own work the exhibition showcased artworks by all artists who participated in the program during 2015.

At this moment of writing, I recall how Mr. Gill and me walked between video works and installations. His suspicious look expressed vehemently his discontent. His tongue clicked energetically against his palate and he continued to cluck for the rest of our visit. He did make an effort though to understand. He was dazzled by a video work – a documentation of the Rapping Battle, which took place at the Bijlmer in October. The event was organized by artist in residence Ryts Monet. Each rapper was asked to rap in his own language, there were no women only men striking in Surinamese, Dutch, Italian, Icelandic, French and German. The Icelandic rapper, who was as colorful of garments as he was serious of mimics won the battle and took the prize – a brand new wireless microphone.

I observed the distant Gill. I could understand he found interest in the video, because he was himself a man of language, of words and of articulation. But as I looked deeper into him, I began to think that Gill got too overwhelmed by the video, that he might had suffered a heart attack and die on the spot.

The rappers continued gesturing with their hands, physically teasing each other and speeding up the rhythm. I kidnapped Gill out of the Gallery and sat him in a coffee-bar close by.

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It was 16 O'clock between coffees, tea cups and apple-flaps. We were sitting with many people amongst whom Gill was a minority Caucasian. He observed them around him. He took notice of that many of them were Christians, by spotting the cross pendants over their necks. There were dark Christians, and darks who were Muslims and myself who is Hebraic and dark (Hebraic as Gill would have liked to put it). Among us he seemed estranged, sitting aside wearing the usual heavy coat and long smock, and the brown cute loafers that characterized him so much.

The cafe-sitters seemed charmed by his embodiment – alien and cute. But little did they know about him. As they observed him, they grew oblivious to who he was, and to who he really was.

I took out my audio recorder, and placed it on the table. What happened next symbolizes perhaps my different projects on Gill, my attempts to reach out to him and to make his unique voice reach out many.

To his quandary 'what it was' I showed the Rec. button and pacified: "This is to record this conversation so I shan't miss out on details. This audio recording device helps me remember things better."

Gill protested lightly and asked whether even our brains became industrialized and manufactured these days, whether our own brains and imaginary were entirely in the possession of 'things'.

If you trust your brain, said he, then you should have a better memory than if you would have trusted a machine to have it for you.

I understood his argument, we become lazy to-day enough to let our bodies be made by every 'thing.'

It starts with what we eat, how we wake up, how we arrive to work, how we think, how we remember or imagine. All sorts of devices operated or created

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by all sorts of people, originating from all sorts of lands, dictate our all sort of daily habits prior to and subsequent to the tear we make in all sorts of plastic foils, that wrap most of these things.

Our bodies are reduced to their mere shell, they stop being our sanctuaries and our vehicles. For a man such as Gill, who argued that the art of building a house as the art of flushing toilets and the art of baking breads were quintessential of our existence, a device such as the recorder pierced too deep into the realm of humanity. The capacities to remember, to imagine and to therefor agree upon the different outcomes of these mental exercises become latent, sometimes too ill.

Rather, the training of those daily activities should not tire. Training in baking bread, in letter-typing, in remembering.

Without the recording device, what I am to report here will be exported from the conversation I absorbed and embodied. However with the device's help, my report will merely repeat the things that had been said but, which express none of the impressions left on me from the conversation. The device's presence Isolates the information it recorded from my 'presence there', while both could otherwise be entangled in 'an experience'.

Gill sipped his coffee and batted his tongue again, closing his mouth and sealing his lips as an English man. They only opened again to say:

GILL There are different ways to record and train ourselves to remember occurrences. We may trust the different recording devices, yes, but we better constitute a relationship between ourselves and a larger past, and this relationship shan't be solely intermediated by an apparatus. Or it may, but with our little expectation to gain access to ourselves.

GILL When we were in the gallery, I recognized things I have said in the past. Sentences such as ‘Don’t think I am making too much fuss about it’ or ‘We worship beauty...’ and the like.

They appeared on banners and were presented as if they were artifacts, residues of an event or a protest that took place.

R’M Accurate diagnosis. But we are slightly starting from the end. From how I would like this project to approach the imaginary of people. I have been cheating a little, you see... The memory of the project was grander for me than its production. In this sense, I was more interested in its residues and in its sense of ‘happened.’

GILL You devised the project to happen only so you could show it happened?

R’M Yes... Nay... To some extent. Secretly this project attempted to create a memory of what happened in the Bijlmer between August to November 2015. But let me draw back a little, to give you some context. I have been interested in your writings, your essays as well as your autobiography, and deduced from them your philosophy on Isolation. I mark it Isolation with a capital I, as it seems a main mechanism which stands central both in your writings and central in the world. If there is power that is corrupted it is exercised via the tool of Isolation.

GILL ‘Power is always corrupting...’

R’M ‘...whether among princes or churchmen, soldiers or police or men of business, but particularly and above all among politicians.’



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I know that bit from your autobiography. And like other bits of your wits I wondered whether it could ‘hold water’ still today, whether people will find it useful or whether they could embrace it. Loaded with a hunch, I set the project in the Bijlmer. I knew the Bijlmer was an Isolated area, so it was suitable for a case study to bring the philosophy of one English man, into a relatively different place.

GILL Did you find the attention you wished for?

R’M I have, but I don’t know if we should discuss this because alternatively, the attention I want to draw is to and from ‘now’.

GILL Now?

R’M Now after the project is finalized – after it ‘happened’; now after the events.

Gill exhaled heavily. I think this was not to express a dismissal to what I said, but to prepare himself to listen, to make more room in his body to contain. And by clearing his throat, he as though wished to canalize the information without disturbance.

R’M I divide the project to three phases, pre-production, production, and post-production. The pre-production phase entailed the announcements about setting up the project to the neighborhood. Gradually, people arrived to my studio to talk and read about your philosophy. In this phase the visitors and I have worked together, starting from choosing core sentences from your writings to printing them on banners. At this phase one person also remarked that the Bijlmer residents knew well enough about Isolation,

and that it did not matter to them whether it was the kind of Isolation with a capital or with a lower-case I, and that perhaps the project should have been set in the center of Amsterdam – bringing Bijlmer to them, thus letting the Bijlmer leak outside.

The second phase was the production phase – the moments when we took the banners out on the street and created different situations. We took the materials outside, groups, sometimes few people, sometimes I was also by myself, alone. These moments were rather silent, intimate, almost discrete. Like one of these occurrences one spots on the street, and later the same week recalls of the peculiar situation he or she witnessed. There was no need to be loud, for we were not marching or performing any agenda against something, but rather for something.

The post-production phase is a set of unending moments, and conveys the way I report on what ‘happened’. I consider it to be the core of my project. It means to rethink how and what to report on. It means to archive and to present what ‘happened’.

Mr. Gill, I can read the judgment on your face.

GILL You seem to know exactly what I think about this, why won’t you share it with me.

R’M I think, you would phrase it: “what’s all that for? A silent protest? What is this propagating? What a shame, to be so useless of time, and of my words. Should I be quoted silently or discretely, and above all – discretely about Isolation?”

The serious Gill softened in a sudden gesture. It was not clear what gesture it was, perhaps a small noticeable shudder, but it relaxed his face to a welcoming smile. I was not intending to mock the man, I was neither

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your actions seem almost
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I wish to abort this nonsense
and to stop ‘being’ an artist.
I am not one.

I move between pride and
shame of what I do.

It grows in me that art...
that I don’t understand it.

meaning to imitate and by thus to entertain or mirror his image, but it came out of me also as a sudden gesture towards someone I felt comfortable to be with. In another swift action he organized his body on the chair and leaned forward, while retrieving his serious voice:

GILL Partially. In fact, little I appreciate a political action when conveyed through artistic propaganda. But in fact, while all art is propaganda, I prefer the arts to remain solely useful, un-doubtful, powerful in its reactions. And your actions seem almost political – conversations but not lectures, a walk or a situation on the street but not a loud cry-out.

R’M I would not call it art anymore. Part of me wishes to abort this nonsense and to stop ‘being’ an artist. As a matter of fact, I think I am not one. I move in a constant swing between pride and shame of what I do. It grows in me that art... that I don’t understand it. I tell stories.

I was merely interested in meeting people, meeting you, doing something together and reporting about it – telling its story.

GILL There can be many issues in reporting as well. In the way one deals with the material, the images, the letter typing, in press and distribution. The choice of some letter types propagate the period they were designed in, but your choice will also indicate the tools used to design the typeface you chose. They indicate if they were carved in stone or in wood. And when you distribute a report you inevitably signal the specificities of your medium. How do you consider this logic in the decisions you make when you build your story?



...

people who were not at the situations... how should they remember the event when it is represented in a drawing other than in a photograph, which was recorded by a machine?

R'M I agree that this logic is found in the different media. It is a general rule also in what I mean when I say 'report'. My first report was to present the banners that were used in the situations outside. I chose to install them together with drawings that depict the situations I created. So then secondly, I report visually by drawing the situations, instead of using photographs. Thirdly and last, I report more in details on the whole context of the project through this conversation with you. For it was with your line of thinking that I pursued to realize this project, and it was with my execution of it. It ought to be only natural to reflect on it together.

GILL From the perspective of now, as the drawings and banners are presented to visitors at the gallery – people who were not at the situations... how should they remember the event when it is represented in a drawing, other than in a photograph that was recorded by a machine?

R'M You said: "If I remember such and such rather than something else, it must be because I'm a different sort of person from what I would have been if I had remembered other things." You wrote this in your autobiography. Memory is unstable. It acts as an agency that can (be a) trigger and provoke, and I felt that the use of photography would stabilize the documentation, while I wish people would delve in to the drawings and endeavor to unscramble it.

GILL To doubt it?

R'M The use of a machine is doubtful when you wish people to run a scene in their imagination. One of your texts criticized our society in which people go to work to operate machines in a factory, only to



have money at the end of a day, to buy bread which is – sliced by another machine.

I like the fact you were provoked by a machine-sliced-bread early already about the end of the first half of the 20th century. But this was not an anal diagnosis, you expressed the inability to escape the machine.

GILL And you wished to escape it yourself?

R'M I have tried indeed to refrain from using photography, to refrain from printing the banners mechanically. I trusted craft will be led by my imagination, and that the handcraft will stir others imagination.

GILL And for this report – will you use the machine to detail this conversation.

R'M I will put my trust again on craft and imagination.

Gill froze in his seat. His eyes pierced through the pane and observed the air between the people.

His hair rested on his forehead, making him look like a child. Thin hairs were these, either due to weariness or because they were baby hairs. Therein also, his character sets so many problematics.

I felt attracted, so to speak, to the fact he was dragged along the years to the shadows. I was energized by the idea of revoking his memory after many had preferred to forget him.

He looked outside, I looked at him. Trying to see into his mind, into the rage or aversion he felt towards the Art-Salons, and which eventually made the occasion for him to Isolate himself and his family.

This is both real and personal.

I felt that I could, to some extent, identify with the invitation to the occasion of 'voluntary Isolation.'

In the Bijlmer, I felt at times frustrated with my project. Little by little, as I produced items – banners or drawings – I felt that I was becoming Isolated.

Ironically this happened in a platform that was erected to abridge people, to bring artist to break the structural life in the area, and by thus to unfurl a new air.

The pressure kept banging and piling. Towards the end of the residency I committed to pauses, and invested more time on nature walks, on catching the sun before it diminished.

On early October I discovered the nearby lake. I found a designated sitting-spot in between trees, dirt and water. Aside of few old naked-men, I sat, stood up again and undressed. To sit among them was a deed of bravery, with which I challenge myself. However, the moment I sat down naked, the thought set-in that I was now also exposed to harassment or at least to the opportunity the naked-men thought it was – the opportunity to make a pass. Even though, I tried to be nice. As an excuse I leaned busy towards my notebook and... wrote a poem. All the while the naked-men kept strolling like hyenas. These hidden walks around lake, between naked bodies and trees hid-away the rush and pressure of deadlines in production.

In the woods, I thought it might be true that old people were like children, they too wish to secure themselves against the growing cement that gradually builds around them. In the quarantine they find a way out of a world controlled by machine-things and machine-men.

In the coffee bar, I shared my poem with Gill, who was a man of nature, of language and sex.

He listened with great display of thirst, and reacted with squinted eyes: "Phenomenological!" he called out.

People go to work to operate machines in a factory only to have money at the end of a day to buy bread, which is – sliced by another machine.

...

the inability to escape the machine.

...

Do you wish to escape it yourself?



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