

ART IN REVIEW

Stuart Brisley

By ROBERTA SMITH
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‘Performance, Paintings, Sculpture, Video’

*Algis Greenspon**71 Morton Street**South Village**Through April 23*

Mitchell Algis, advocate of neglected artists, has acquired a partner, Amy Greenspon, and moved to a new space, where he continues to fill the gaps and chinks in the collective understanding of the recent past. His latest contribution is a small survey — and the New York solo debut — of the British artist Stuart Brisley, a multimedia wizard of the abject, absurd and often scatological who was born in 1933 and started inflicting himself on the London art scene in the mid-1960s. It is, in its own way, a hair-raising event. If you ever wondered where younger British artists like Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin got some of their ideas, take a look.

The show is dominated by extravagantly grim black-and-white photographs documenting Mr. Brisley’s furious, politically minded, often painterly performances. These include the 1972 “And for Today ... Nothing,” enacted over two weeks in an empty London apartment, where Mr. Brisley lay in a bathtub of offal-laced water, and the 1978 “Between the Wall and the Floor,” executed in 1978 in a bleak room in Dublin, where he did battle with one suspended sculptural contraption while, hanging naked, from another. Also on view are videos of two performances, including one from 1978 in which Mr. Brisley sat in a gallery for 10 days not eating, but being served meals that visitors were invited to eat, implying artistic self-sacrifice with religious overtones.

These works are bracketed by a dark, brooding painting from 1960 — apparently made with dirt and tar — that links Mr. Brisley’s interest in organic materials to artists like Jean Dubuffet and Alberto Burri, and a hyper-realistic 2002 sculpture inspired by “The Museum of Human Excrement” described in Freud’s “Interpretation of Dreams.” But it is the photographs, and the orchestrated chaos and horror they encapsulate, that make the most lasting impression. They fulfill their documentary obligation and then some.

ROBERTA SMITH