

## Touching, Crossing and Passing Through

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In 1977 Stuart Brisley was invited to make a work for the 'Documenta' exhibition in Kassel. The work he subsequently made, *Survival in Alien Circumstances*, was in part realised as a response to the fact that the site he had previously been offered for his work had been taken over by Walter de Maria who, backed by oil money, dug a one-kilometre-deep bore hole into which a brass rod was inserted. Finding another site, Brisley, assisted by Christoph Gericke, dug a two-metre-deep trench by hand. As they dug they built a wooden structure on stilts in which Brisley lived for the seventeen days the dig lasted. Once they had hit the watertable they continued to dig until, they could go no further, the water was up to their chests. They had reached their limit. While digging they exposed rubble and human remains from the war. Five years earlier Brisley had made the film *Arbeit Macht Frei*, which was based on a performance, *And for Today ... Nothing*, held in 1972 at Gallery House in London. For the performance Brisley spent two hours each day for two weeks lying in a bath of cold black water containing floating pieces of what appeared to be offal. Low light and the overpowering stench of putrefaction from the lumps of rotting offal that lay in the room's hand basin and on the shelf by the bath gave the impression that Brisley was actually bathing in rotting matter. In the film, a close-up sequence of Brisley vomiting is followed by shots of his face lying in a bath of water. Paul Overy has described how

the disturbing images of Brisley's water-logged face are transformed by various technical devices from colour through black and white, degradation and so on, so that at some points the image has almost become lost and the film appears abstract... Brisley has turned his own body into an object; virtually emptied it of its humanity.<sup>1</sup>

All three works position the body in relation to history and to work; to cleansing, defilement and extermination; and ultimately to structures of power. These are works that can be situated in terms of the abject – not as an image of dirt, but in terms of a complex understanding of how the body defines its limits and boundaries in relation to a dirt

that is outside or alien to the body – and what happens when those limits and boundaries are crossed. It might seem that the installation created this year for the John Hansard Gallery, *Crossings* – that incorporates the sound installation *Touching Black Ice* and the film projection *Estonia* – is rather remote from these, and other earlier works. Where the performances and films of twenty five years ago position Brisley's body as the material for each work, for these new works his body is absent. Both works take catastrophe as their immediate subject; the sinking of the RMS Titanic after it struck an iceberg in the Atlantic in 1912 and the sinking of the roll-on roll-off passenger ferry MS Estonia in heavy seas in 1994 in the Baltic.

For Brisley, performance has always had little to do with the narcissism of self-expression but has instead been primarily politically-directed. This sense of the political exists both in terms of his adoption of specific subject matter as much as it can be identified in the material of performance and how it is delivered. He has maintained that performance is best approached not in terms of the theatrical that can only establish 'yet another level of conformity to support the notion of the separation between art and politics'.<sup>2</sup> His 1975 statement 'Anti Performance Art' makes quite clear that, for him, performance was political through recourse to 'the notion of the public revelation of process stemming from, and being part of the initial concept' and that therefore

The essential basis for the public exposure of process must have a political aspect in the sense that it must be consciously directed towards other people at specific times, and in specific places. It must involve a concept to do with others. The initial concept cannot be realized, until it itself has been overcome, transformed by others with a collective concern, through the public process.<sup>3</sup>

With regard to such a view of performance in terms of its collective aspect and notion of process, any response to issues of class, labour or the market is largely defined by questions of context in terms of conception and realization. Any expression of personal anxiety or existential despair can be transformed through a transcendence that, as a form of self-surpassing, has immediately social ramifications.

Where *Survival in Alien Circumstances*, for instance, addressed the particular contrast of resources behind de Maria's work and Brisley's, allied to this was a focus on the activity of manual work and how particular issues of history and power could be revealed. The later *Cenotaph Project* – in its conception and different presentations between 1987 and 1990 – examined similar questions evoking memories of war, of personal and collective loss, and their representations

in terms of the architecture of state power. Where the earlier project was performed in a specific place and time, the later project was predominantly sculptural in its realization but its conception and aims embodied aspects of the performative.

The works that make up the installation *Crossings* should be approached in a similar way. In one space a full-sized fiberglass sailing boat – a ‘Wagtail’ dinghy – is supported a few feet off the ground so that the base of the rudder is just off the floor. The boat points towards the gallery’s curved wall that is flooded with a wash of grey, deadening light. This is light that, for Brisley, is ‘looking into an impenetrable substance, or perceptibly into a nothingness’. The grey-ness of the light meets the grey-ness of the wall that fades into dark-nesses. This wash of non-colour contains a sound landscape made up of changing tones suggestive of shifting pressure; the sounds of Morse code floating in and out of frequency, both SOS and the distress signal sent out by the Titanic’s radio operators, CQD DE MGY (CQD being then Marconi’s general distress call requiring immediate assistance, DE being ‘this is’, and MGY being the Titanic’s call sign); the sounds of water, engines, the wind and waves, and of crushing and buckling. The sound-scape also contains a fragmentary narrative comprising testimony from Eva Hart, an eight-year-old survivor of the sinking, as well as matter of fact information of, for instance the physiological effects of immersion in freezing water. The title – *Touching Black Ice* – refers to the iceberg that the ship collided with, a blackberg which is essentially a capsized glacial iceberg, and also refers to the frazzle on the sea’s surface that night that in suppressing its movement appears to give it an oily sheen (snow falling on water that should freeze because of its temperature but can’t because of its movement). The sinking here is represented through a sense of touching that which is difficult to see; boundaries that should be clearly demarcated slide together as a moment of passing that creates a set of passages.

The cause of the sinking of the passenger ferry M/s Estonia, which is the subject of the film *Estonia*, cannot be so easily explained and has remained the subject of heated speculation. At the film’s centre is the recorded exchange between the ship’s radio operator calling mayday and coast stations and other ships. This haunting exchange is juxtaposed against a computer animation of the boat listing and then capsizing as it sinks. The time that elapses from the first mayday signal to its final transmission is just under six minutes. A proportion of this exchange concerns the fixing of its position – difficult as the Estonia was suffering from blackout but is achieved twelve seconds before its last transmission.

Such details are, however, but fragments that point towards Brisley's true subject in bringing together these two maritime catastrophes. Both the title of the exhibition – *Crossings* – and the title of the sound installation, underline that providing a narrative for each event is far from being Brisley's purpose. Both disasters turn the everyday on its head to provide a symbolic condition whereby day-to-day existence attempts to come to terms with such extraordinary and on the whole unknowable events. The 'crossing' is that of the commuter or the purposeful traveller that is largely unremarkable. It also refers to a crossing that marks a grappling at understanding that which is beyond normal everyday experience, and what happens when one touches that experience physically – an experience that most of us are removed from – and mentally (whether involved directly or not). Disaster, in this sense, acts as a rupture to the skin of daily life, transgressing the boundaries and routines by which we lead our lives, but also defining negatively the terms of that life.

Although Brisley's work has always posed such questions of personal existence and how it might be defined by the self and one's social interaction and engagement. 'Crossings' also suggests means of finding a way through such events, of puncturing barriers and boundaries between different states of being. Both disasters created social traumas that were felt locally, nationally and internationally. The effect on different communities – in Southampton and New York, or Tallinn and Helsinki – is one that can be constructed and understood politically by an attention to the specifics of class and labour that such narratives unlock. These narratives also colour readings of history that can be, from one vantage point, understood by recourse to the example of the sublime: the terror and anxiety faced by the sheer unrepresentability of the disaster and the uncomprehending difference it holds in terms of normal states of being. The launching of the Titanic presented a belief that such a view of nature could be tamed, contained and described by the rational logic of science and given the march of progress through the machine age. Its sinking put the lie to such a belief. At the far end of the Century, the sinking of the Estonia reveals our continued inability to face such brutal reality and the need to locate explanation and representation in that which is unverifiable. Where does the subject of Brisley's work therefore lie? It is in part with the stripping down of appearance and the confrontation with those areas where definitions of what existence might mean – collectively as much as personally – are put under pressure. This can perhaps be located here in the recognition that the rupture of routine and the corresponding crossing of different states or boundaries

defining existence can equate with what the critic Maurice Blanchot has termed such a feeling of excess, perhaps paradoxically, as also 'the calm of the disaster'.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Paul Overy, 'Introduction', *Stuart Brisley*, ICA, London 1981, p. 9.
  2. Stuart Brisley 'Anti Performance Art', statement November 1975, in *English Art Today* 1960-76, Electa Editrice, Milan, 1976, p. 416.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 417.
  4. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, University of Nebraska Press, London 1995, p. 6.