

Exhibitions

Stuart Brisley: Next Door (the missing subject)

PEER London 29 February to 28 April

Stuart Brisley – the name brings to mind the grey 1970s, the three-day week, miners' strikes, the winter of discontent, bleak industrial music, punk nihilism, the queen's Silver Jubilee, the last pieces of the rotting carcass of empire falling to the stony ground, which all hang together in the depressing, draining fog of British cultural memory. But wait, isn't this the year of the Diamond Jubilee? Doesn't the economy lie in tatters once more? Haven't the contortions of capitalism (and its esurient sire, corporatism) rendered swathes of society as junk, apparently undeserving of safety net or compassion? Might we then look to Brisley for a significant response?

Once the *enfant terrible* of UK performance art and famous as a fierce political presence at the Slade – where he was appointed to the faculty by the students – Brisley, strangely, has not received the attention in print one might expect. In the late 1960s and early 70s his performances were seen as a British equivalent to the work of the Viennese Actionists, involving a brute physicality, fractured ritualism and a masochistic approach to the material stuff of the body, a Francis Bacon painting become flesh. To read his work of that period through the lens of George Bataille's base materialism and Michel Foucault's critique of power, one might

say that Brisley's actions corporeally represented and externalised the violence of power rendered unseen in modernity.

In recent years Brisley's work has become increasingly concerned with ordure – that is, with shit, detritus, crap, garbage – both literally and allegorically. On the one hand human ordure: the unemployed, the fiscally weak, those thrown onto the stinking heap of history, gazed upon with impotent sadness by Walter Benjamin's Angelus Novus; on the other the literal junk produced under capitalism, its traces, its remainder. These themes are played out in his latest show at PEER: 'Next Door (the missing subject)'.

In May 2010 PEER leased an adjacent, semi-derelict shop from Hackney Council. Vacant for several years, formerly it had been a sign-makers, a bookshop and an electrical supplies business. Detritus and fittings from all three businesses remained strewn around the space. Two days after the lease was signed, Brisley took up residence and spent ten days manipulating the detritus to his aesthetic satisfaction, piling it up and pulling it down, a microcosmic world in flux. A drawing of the queen, *Monarch at Bay*, 1995, from an earlier show was placed against one wall, watching menacingly and absurdly over proceedings, while in the gallery space was hung his portrait of Prince Charles, *Seeing Red*, 1995. The action could be viewed from outside the shop through the large glass fronting or through a small window to one side.

Next Door (the missing subject) is ostensibly a manipulated record of this performance. Room one contains a series of photographs that document it shot from outside the shop window so that the ambient life of the street – trees, bystanders and so on – is reflected in the glass; while room two – the room that was formally the adjacent shop – displays a 30-minute video edit of the action taking place. There is also a booklet, *Next Door (the missing text)*, that records scraps of writing that Brisley posted around the space throughout the residency.

With *Next Door* Brisley has fashioned one of the most effective and troubling aesthetic responses to the financial crash and the psychic fallout thereof. Watching the film on a dank grey afternoon in March 2012 is a raw and unconsoling experience. Brisley has taken what appear to be rudimentary starting blocks and built something uncompromising, fractal and monstrous that works on the very nerve endings. The video projection is particularly effective. Shot from several fixed positions throughout the space and overlaid with a soundtrack manipulated from the original recordings, it becomes a panel on which to contemplate obliquely the ills of the age on this septic isle and beyond: structural collapse, the effects of Blairite regeneration, exclusion, endless wars of shock and awe. It forms ripples of association that spread from the room itself to the neoliberal social policies being visibly enacted in the surrounding area of Hoxton and its environs, to the entire ethical and fiscal bankruptcy that brings us to the edge. It reaches back into art history too; in Brisley's text Casper David Friedrich, Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix are referenced. What are we to make of the invocation of these three titanic Romantics? Here we are faced with the monstrous sublime, the junk sublime, the nihilist sublime. Instead of nature transfigured we are faced with the excrement of capital piled up in a tiny room in East London. The reference to Friedrich's nightmarish icescapes is both absurd and effective. HRH Queen Elizabeth watches on, a ridiculous, nightmarish, demon matriarch. Brisley is an ice wind blowing in from the past to remind us that the structures of power that were in place



Stuart Brisley
Next Door (the missing subject) 2010
performance

then are not so different now, topped off by a 'representative' government packed with Etonians and an unelected head of state. It is all refreshingly brutal, like colonic irrigation.

While watching the film, a quote from Harold Pinter on Samuel Beckett came to mind and it seems apposite here: 'The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don't want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement ... He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden path, he's not slipping me a wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he's not selling me anything I don't want to buy – he doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not – he hasn't got his hand over his heart. Well, I'll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker.' And I'll buy Brisley's. ■

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