

PERFORMANCE

Midday, Thursday afternoon. The public gathers, curious, around the low circular barrier set up in the middle of a busy, provincial shopping arcade. It encloses a white square platform. Nothing more. The crowd grows, as the lunch hour progresses.

They do not know what to expect. The notice simply says that a certain Stuart Brisley will be continuously "performing" for forty-eight hours approximately, with the assistance of Leslie Haslam and Ron Haselden. What does it all mean?

A nervous expectancy runs through the crowd. From nowhere a dog appears and trots nonchalantly around the platform until it realizes the size of its audience and cowers off. Some people ask if this is part of the act.

Brisley arrives promptly at 12.30 together with Haslam, Haselden and their photographic equipment. He strides in, determined, and seemingly unaware of the crowd that is waiting for him. Haslam's camera starts clicking. The crowd views in hushed silence as Haselden produces a very impressive cine-camera.

The equipment arrives: long wooden planks; a saw; a hammer; boxes; buckets. Brisley is very detached and ignores the nervous titters amongst his audience as a plate of eggs and a toothbrush are brought in.

Talking only to Haslam, he begins opening boxes and mixing buckets of paint. They start measuring the planks of wood in relation to Brisley's height. All this done, Brisley carefully puts out his cigarette and begins sawing.

- What's it all about? Have you read any explanation of all this?

Nobody has. There isn't even a title to be seen anywhere.

- Look at him! He's in a trance! I don't even think he realizes what's going on around him!

BRISLEY: I got terribly nervous just before I was due to "appear". I never know quite what I am going to face. And I have to build up a relationship with people. It's really quite natural that I should appear distant and detached at the beginning. I don't know anybody. It's just like any form of personal rapport. It takes time to make contacts with people.

Brisley continues sawing and hammering the long planks of wood together. Apart from an occasional comment directed to Haslam, he remains completely absorbed in his work. The crowd, disappointed that the show is not more immediately interesting or salacious, moves away. People return to their offices, snack-bars, appointments, and just a few stray individuals remain to watch the action.

By the evening, the construction has begun to take shape: It is a long, oblong, open box made-to-measure for Brisley to stand in. He is still sawing and hammering with the greatest precision, adding a series of close-set wooden frames to the top of his "box", so that it seems to be sprouting like a mush-

room. Curiously, the object, and Brisley, are covered in grey paint. His face, hair and shoulders are grey and plastered. A huge crowd of people are watching. They no longer view in an awed silence, as they did at the very beginning. Comments and excited discussions are rife:

- I saw it all! He took the eggs, broke them over his head, and then threw a bucket of paint on himself.....

- So this is what we're all coming to! When I was young they locked the lunatics away. Now they're called artists.

- Well, I don't want to criticize because I don't understand it. But whatever it's all about, I must say that I like all this initiative out in the open. It makes life that much more interesting, doesn't it?

- The eggs! The toothbrush! Fertility! Life! It's all a criticism of the apathy of the bourgeoisie. He wants people to shout and swear and throw things at him.

Brisley steps into his construction, and stands in it, motionless. After some time, he turns round. He continues like this for about half an hour, maybe longer.

A wild-eyed young man appears with a deranged smile on his lips, and begins singing happily in a loud voice. People take little notice of him. They are too interested in their discussions.

The piece of carpentry grows with the evening. At various intervals, Haslam and Haselden take their pictures. Gradually, Brisley relaxes and starts talking to people in the audience

and answering questions.

BRISLEY: Basically the construction represents the body and mind of man. The lower part is the cage in which we live and work from day to day, while the upper part, which is purposely left open, represents our thoughts, our souls - freedom.

I covered myself in paint in order to distinguish myself from the audience: to separate myself from them, and become a part of the work I was creating. The eggs were to protect my face, actually. And the toothbrush? Well, it was to clean my teeth.... We have become so used to complicated, symbolic explanations that it never occurs to us to apply the most obvious ones!

It would have been too easy to supply a ready-made explanation from the very beginning. The idea is that people participate and use their imaginations.

There are about one hundred and fifty of us "performance" artists in Great Britain, and the number is growing. We live, and hopefully share our artistic experiences with "the man in the street" instead of the specialized "élite" who frequent art galleries and such.

The whole static, complacent decadence of the average gallery has nothing whatever to do with what is really going on in the world.

Brisley stays alone with his creation, finally sleeping on the

ground next to it when the last interested passer-by has gone, in the small hours.

The next morning he is still asleep, covered with a sheet of polythene, unaware of the noise and bustle around him, as people begin their working days.

BRISLEY: Of course, different nationalities react in different ways to my work - the English tend to get offended until they know exactly what's going on: the Italians are curious: the Germans very exact, and so on - but basically I have had nothing but positive results..... I worked for twelve days in Rottweil, a small German village, and at the end a group of school-children presented me with two large books of drawings inspired by my work. People have sometimes come and told me that what I am doing represents their own lives for them. They stop and ask themselves - Why am I rushing to work? Why do I watch silly programmes on T.V. every evening? - And yet, I've seen "expert" and trendy gallery-owners completely baffled and mystified by what I am doing.

By midday, Friday, the construction has taken on a definite shape. Brisley is walking round and round his work in never-ending circles. Haslam and Haselden are both watching. The crowd is thick, and active discussions are taking place at every point:
- He's too superior and alienated. There's no real participation.

- It's pure participation! I've never seen so much contact and enthusiasm before!

- All this walking round and round. Isn't it just like life?

- But there's no art in all this! The purity of a Michelangelo makes me cry. And this does nothing for me.....

- There's pure poetry in the soul of a man like that! He's a genius! And Haslam is great too: He stays with Brisley, but never assists him. They must have a wonderful understanding.

Brisley stops walking, sits down on the platform and removes his boots and socks. Silently, he contemplates his swollen feet, before putting his boots back on. An old woman comes forward and gives him a bag of crisps. Brisley smiles and thanks her, eating them immediately.

By the evening the work is complete, and Brisley is sitting inside the upper part. The crowd is large and the atmosphere, personal involvement and communication has reached its peak. Theories are continuously put forward, and although they vary in their details, the fundamental interpretation is always the same as Brisley's.

BRISLEY: People often ask me if I see myself as an "actor". Obviously there is something of the actor in me to make me want to "perform" at all. And I enjoy doing it, too! At one stage I hung upside down inside my construction for about five minutes. Just for the fun of it. But I am trying to get rid of all this

categorization. I regard this particular work as a piece of sculpture, but if other people see it as a well-constructed piece of carpentry, I'm very flattered. The important thing is that people have looked and thought and discussed.....

I perform an average of two or three times a year. This is because I never use the same idea more than once. And then, of course, I have to find people to finance me.

By Saturday morning the crowd is at its thickest yet. People have come on purpose to see the outcome of the activity. It is due to finish at one o'clock.

Brisley is visibly exhausted, and at times he sways with fatigue. The crowd murmurs its admiration and interest.

At twelve o'clock Brisley, axe in hand, starts pacing round his construction for the last time, his steps getting quicker and quicker. Then he stops. He knocks his work down on its side and begins chopping up the lower "cage" - with just the same precision and accuracy that he had used to construct it. Finally he is left with the upper "soul". He contemplates it with some affection before removing the steel barrier holding back the public. The crowd nervously looks at one another for support. Paradoxically, one man who had happily walked inside the ring to take photographs, now rushes to hide behind the non-existent barrier. A smiling figure on a bicycle suddenly enters the ring, gaily rides round it a few times, and disappears just as quickly.

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People begin to take hesitant steps forward. The ice has been broken.

BRISLEY: All my work had been planned from first to last, but I was unsure what to do at the very end. Originally, I thought of having a discussion with the public, but this seemed unnecessarily formal because discussions had been taking place all through my performance, which, of course, was the best thing that could have happened. And so the only logical step was to destroy the symbolic "cage" and remove the enclosure because they no longer served a purpose.

Thus the "performance" ended, and people went back to their "normal" lives, some of them, at least, enriched by the two-day experience of which they themselves had been an integral part.

Sharon Behr