

The use of the artist's own body as a medium of expression has been well championed in the Seventies. Photography subjected it to taxonomic scrutiny (Klaus Rinke); video examined and re-examined the self's mirror-image (Joan Jonas); performance with the wind in its sails diversified into 'opera' (Robert Wilson), horror entertainment (Chris Burden), shamanism (Joseph Beuys), or returned to its Romantic origins in artistic lifestyle (Gilbert and George). All are symptomatic of the same desire: to create a closer relationship between art and life and hence a more self-fulfilling public space for the artist.

In a climate of cultural stagnation the freedom attached to working live or directly with one's own body was very attractive. Political and artistic demands have changed though; and artists who once talked of deconstructing the object now talk of deconstructing performance or have given up live work altogether and returned to painting. In fact, breaking through the narcissism barrier has been the test case in the late seventies for so many artists working directly with their bodies. (for all the ugliness and vanity of their recent work Gilbert and George have at least shaken off their old solipsism). Stuart Brisley has been careful to avoid the pitfalls of such a self-centred approach because his art has been motivated at all times by a strong political perspective – in as much as art is always 'to do with others'.<sup>1</sup> I emphasize this not in order to claim that Brisley is the only artist working directly with his body who has consistently managed to avoid narcissism, or that his work is in no way 'psychological', but to dissociate his approach from those who would see it as individualistic and self-obsessed.

As Brisley has recently said: 'The work is never seriously about one's own problems'.<sup>2</sup> The world of 'dark-things' that Brisley's art inhabits is not the workings of the mind directed inwards but outwards to those 'mechanics of power'<sup>3</sup> – the family, the public institutions, the State – which regulate our lives in their myriad, ubiquitous ways. Many artists have used the subject of power (Goya for instance, who has been an influence on Brisley) and many artists have used their own bodies to express this (Oppenheim, Pane) but Brisley is one of the few artists to place the provenance of power in an *active* context by subjecting the body to social tasks and rituals. By using his own body (on his own or with collaborators) as a metaphoric or allegorical site, Brisley enacts and comments upon how the individual manoeuvres himself fitfully, haplessly between authority and freedom.

Brisley's own response to what he saw as cultural stagnation, like many other artists of his generation who came to artistic maturity in the sixties (Brisley was born in 1933) was condi-

tioned by the libertarian politics of the time. Optimism went hand in hand with iconoclasm; everyone was 'extending' their medium. Theatrical values inculcated themselves in mainstream activity: the minimalist object, lyrical abstraction. The theatre in fact became a putative source of freedom for those who sought collaborative forms of activity outside of object-making and the art-market. Jean Jacques Lebel, John Cage, Michael Kirby, Guy Debord, Jerzy Grotowski, Hans Magnus Enzenberger, Herbert Marcuse and many others, in their various ways, attacked the notion of Fine-Art and its authoritarian voice in the individual author/producer. Paris May 1968 was the symbolic and active affirmation of the new aesthetics. Embodied in the street theatre, poster-collectives and graffiti was a combative art of the future that had learnt from the revolutionary past: constructivism, dada, surrealism.

One of the specific influences on Brisley at the time was a catalogue of an exhibition at the Stockholm Museum of Modern Art in 1969, **Poesin maste göras av alla! Förändra världen!** (Transform the world! Poetry must be made by all!). Marx and Lautreamont; praxis and the imagination, the twin spirits of revolution, systematized by Marcuse and transformed into verse and monument on the streets of Paris in '68. The exhibition, organized by Ronald Hunt, was a survey of constructivism, dada and surrealism. The catalogue contains an introductory essay by Hunt full of brave idealism and the then current vogue for primitivism. (It is worth noting that *The Savage Mind* had appeared in English in 1966). Following Hunt's essay is in fact an extract from Gregory Bateson's 1932 account of the Naven Ceremonies of the Iatmul People in Sepik, New Guinea. The introduction of straight anthropological material into an art-exhibition catalogue (there was even a photo of a Solomon Islander on the cover) was a direct attempt at finding a pre-scientific status for those pioneer modernist arts which proposed participatory forms of activity. Whatever these words and pictures confirmed in Brisley it was not simply a matter of transposing the look of primitive rituals into contemporary form, but understanding how rituals have functioned in society. The consensual function of the ritual was what attracted Brisley to its form. The mandate was to find an art that reached out to an audience without the intermediary classifications of high-culture and professionalism. In Brisley's public works that mandate still stands today even if its political optimism has receded.

In the late sixties and early seventies because of this mandate, Brisley's work was invariably presented and reviewed in a new-theatre context. Reviewing **Celebration for Due Process** at

the Royal Court in 1970, in *The New Statesman*, Benedict Nightingale said: 'But Brisley hasn't identified a properly evil correlative; he's raging at a symbol, and comes to resemble an inarticulate, overwrought child, vomiting from sheer temper.' Nightingale is judging Brisley's gesture *dramatically*. The gesture, he is saying, lacks psychological truth. Although conventional psychological elements have played a part in Brisley's work the concern with dramatic form which Nightingale addresses himself to is antipathetic to the way Brisley (and most performance art) works. 'We were much more concerned with *doing things*'.<sup>4</sup> The collaborative value of the work was where any 'psychological truth' lay. 'Doing things' for Brisley not only meant incorporating process into the work (as it did for Serra, Le Va and Morris) but finally stepping into that process himself. In the mid-sixties Brisley was making fairly conventional constructivist sculpture. Politicization blew away their preciousness; Brisley increased their scale and used them as environments: enormous geometric units reminiscent of constructivist theatre towers, that were clambered over and perched on. Entering the work and claiming it as a public space was a natural step in the face of Brisley's increasing commitment to seeing the studio-based tradition of Western art as moribund. Environmental art offered 'new relationships' between artist and audience. 'In environmental work the public is confronted by potential experiences which in evading known forms in art may not be recognisable as art and may be exposed to totally unexpected and uncatered for responses'.<sup>5</sup> Brisley wrote this in 1969. Since then he may have modified the framework of such a quest, but the terms of its inquiry still apply.

In the spirit of the new Dada (and the anti-illusion of the new sculpture) materials in the early environments were roughed up, 'messed' about, incorporated into the work for their maximum *material* value. Messiness in Brisley's case more often than not signals disgust. On occasions paint was used to disfigure and obliterate form. On other occasions natural processes, specifically the decay of food, were incorporated into the work, which Brisley has consistently used since 1968. The incorporation of organic material involved a different approach to live-work. The early environments tended to be unstructured; expressionist spectacles. Allowing organic processes to take their natural course demanded an extended, linear structure; action *unfolded* as in a ritual. Although Brisley had made **White Meal** in 1968 (a one day performance at Middle Earth) it wasn't until **You Know it Makes Sense 2** at the Serpentine in 1972 that this linear ritual structure was used in any coherent fashion. The earlier work had tended to adopt ritual elements *ad hoc*.

Rituals provide an index or register of social relations. The ritual 'demarcates, emphasizes, affirms, solemnizes, and also smooths over critical changes in social relationships'.<sup>6</sup> The original sacred meaning of the term though has been diminished. The word is more frequently used as an expression of stylization, repetition and emptiness – it has become secularized. In these terms Brisley's performances are not strictly rituals, although at times they do make visual reference to their original sacred function. What Brisley's performances incorporate are the *rules* of ritual: obedience, obligation and duty; those sources of power which the ritual symbolically demarcates. Brisley is not interested in the historical, mythical or primitive flavour of the ritual (there is no search for origins; there are no primitive props) what concerns him is how their structure as a social force, as 'socially accepted repetitive acts'<sup>7</sup> can produce intelligible insights into the way society operates –

the way power is made manifest between individuals and institutions. Brisley's art is nothing short of a politicization of the body. As Michel Foucault has written in *Discipline and Punish*: 'The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs'. It is not surprising to note that Brisley has referred to a recent piece as 'cruelty learning'.<sup>8</sup> Just as demonstrations, marches and picket lines attempt to disengage the authority of their opponents, Brisley rituals are performed to convey dissent. This may take a fairly direct (and unsuccessful) form as in **Measurement and Division** at the *Hayward Annual* in 1977 in which covered in paint he hung himself upside down by the ankles inside a wooden cage, or a reflective form as in the Christmas dinner piece **10 Days**.

Brisley's use of the rules of ritual can be divided into two types: the purification ritual or *rite de passage* (which Brisley uses in both an active and passive form) and the contest ritual (an active power-model). Elements of the former are usually incorporated in the latter. The contest ritual is a quite recent development. In this type of performance Brisley engages physically with a collaborator/opponent. In the purification ritual Brisley puts himself into solitary self-imposed situations of constraint. In the early work this took the form of 'live-situations', tableaux in which Brisley was estranged from the viewer, creating a strongly voyeuristic viewing relationship between viewer and work. In later work such as **10 Days** the audience became directly involved. Talking to the audience 'broke the skin' of the work. In the early 'live-situations' the image (Brisley would remain still for set periods of time) carried the commentary. In the later work communication became actual and instrumental. 'The earlier work was to do with presenting images and the later work was about opening up and articulating the arguments that were represented by those images'.<sup>9</sup>

One of the early image pieces or tableaux was **And for today . . . nothing** (1972). Over a period of two weeks, for two hours a day, Brisley sat in a bath of cold water and rotting meat in a tiny upstairs room at Gallery House. In the most repellant of ways the piece provided an inescapable feeling of humanity gone 'bad'. Brisley's intentions were unashamedly cathartic, to capture the emotions of the viewer briefly, excitingly. Such explicitness was strong stuff at the time; the English art-world has never been noted for being friendly towards those artists who 'talk-dirty'. Inevitably the shock-value of the work landed Brisley on T.V. (Joe Melia's *Second House*). Asked by a member of the audience after he had performed a shortened version of **And for today . . . nothing** (without the meat) 'what did he feel?' during the piece, Brisley answered: 'It's not an emotional state I'm in, it's a professional state'. This may not be wholly true but it is worth re-emphasizing the basic anti-illusionism of Brisley's rituals. Brisley ceremonies are diagnostic, a critical method, not a device for convention. 'The point at which the artist entertains is usually the stage at which his intuition, response and memory cease to be focussed'.<sup>10</sup> The emotional disengagement is a way of focussing visual impact; what we see is what Brisley 'feels'.

Putting the body into self-imposed situations of constraint is an act of faith, a belief that by lowering the bounds of personal comfort one is putting one's self on the line. **And for today . . . nothing** was relatively undemanding for Brisley in this respect. A piece in which he did put himself on the line to a much

greater degree and hence could be classified as a *rite de passage* was **10 Days**. The work in fact had the characteristic regenerative process of the fertility ritual. First performed in Berlin in 1972 and then at the Acme in 1978, **10 Days** is one of Brisley's most successful reflective ritual pieces and a rich confluence of Brisley's preoccupations: the politics of consumption, class-relations, authority – in effect those social capillaries which support the body-politic. For 10 days over the Christmas period Brisley starved himself. Silent and austere, he was seated at the end of a long bare table. Each meal time food was served to him which he refused. The food was prepared and served by a professional chef. Uneaten food was left on the table to rot. At selected times food was served to the public. People came and went but on the whole there was little change in the action. Brisley would explain the work or answer questions when required. On the tenth day Brisley crawled along the table through the decayed food. The piece ended in the evening with a banquet for friends to celebrate the new self. In such low-key circumstances the emergence of a new self for the casual visitor can only be distantly felt. It is what Brisley's endurance proposes on an imaginative level that counts. Brisley translates process into allegory. Refusing food is a political act. We can read it specifically: a seasonal corrective to overindulgence, or generically as a meta-journey, as the *necessary* production of new values out of a surrounding world of decay. There is a striking silence at the heart of Brisley's work where the past capitulates.

In **180 Hours – Work for 2 People** (Acme Gallery 1978) a 'new-order' wasn't governed by the fulfillment of a specific task but by the convergence of two figments of Brisley's imagination. In recent contest-rituals such as **Between** (De Appel, Amsterdam 1979) the tendency has been to enact power-rituals in the most basic and aggressive ways with another partner – in **Between** Brisley and Iain Robertson (who has worked with Brisley on a number of occasions) spent a set number of periods over 48 hours struggling with each other on a steep ramp. In **180 Hours – Work for 2 People** the territorial struggle was imaginary – conducted as much in the mind of Brisley as the spectator and like **Between** a direct reference to Brisley's own creativity. Brisley took on the persona/actions of two opposed 'roles': A an 'anarchist' who lived in the downstairs gallery and B a bureaucrat or functionary who lived in the upstairs gallery. The schizophrenic tug between their respective 'mind-sets' (A was messy, B was tidy) became the basis for a live-in work lasting for 180 hours and the nearest we get in Brisley's punitive theatre to actual descriptive action. In the imaginative transaction between these two selves he created a spiral of interlocking perspectives and the strongest simulacrum of power gone mad he has yet invented. Like Beckett's *Endgame* we are not sure where we are and what the figures represent. What is inescapable though is how they behave, specifically how B treats A. Discipline (B's own) and surveillance its corollary (B's 'monitoring' of A's space) are functions of B's will to power throughout the work. He is the dominant one, he is the one who makes a hole in the floorboards of his space so as he can drop food and refuse into A's space. He is the one who remains silent and unaccountable. Brisley became either A or B by walking into either gallery which were connected by a stairway. The action was written up each evening by Brisley and displayed each day in the gallery in what became a psychological narrative. In a way the notes conferred a meaning on the action that the viewer could grasp only shadowily. What they provided was an imaginative correlative. On the first day, the

5th of September Brisley wrote: 'If A manages to escape his unpleasant condition he can do so only by becoming like B. Then he experiences power'.<sup>11</sup> On the last day, the 12th of September Brisley wrote: 'B has gone. Yesterday he was adamant that he would outlast his time. But that was the last posture. In the course of the day he experienced the most invidious assault upon his consciousness by his unseen self. It forced the realisation that he was a preservationist and a deteriorationist'.<sup>12</sup> What had become obvious to B was that throwing rubbish into A's space did not actually remove the presence of its smell. His ascetic order was incapable of controlling nature. Or more precisely he refused to accept its natural course. Realising the ultimate impossibility of such negativity he chose 'non-existence'.<sup>13</sup>

As a concept B was that authoritarian part of Brisley, that part of himself which adopted the language and behaviour of institutionalized power. A was the creative, 'feminine'<sup>14</sup> side of his work. 'In a way it was an interpenetration of me as an artist conceiving the work – that was A's role – and me as a wage earner – B's role'.<sup>15</sup> B was the visually stronger of the two because it was through his actions (swinging from the catatonic to the manic) that the contradictions of his order could be felt. The fact that he wore dark glasses and was therefore unable to return the viewer's gaze increased his position of isolation.

Looking takes on a political dimension in Brisley's work. In many of the pieces the impression is that Brisley is incarcerated in a cell or some other place of detention (**And for today . . . nothing**, and **ZL 65 63 95 C** in which he sat in a wheelchair covered in paint and debris). Immobile, silent, his body is subject to the constant visibility of an observing gaze – a process of surveillance. In Foucault's terms this image of constancy is deeply pessimistic as it implies that knowledge/freedom is always housed by power and therefore in some way the domination of others. Truth/freedom is not a possible state beyond power – it is coexistent with it. In a visual and imaginary way **180 Hours – Work for 2 People** showed how the production of knowledge – B's self-realisation that he was a preservationist – is coextensive with the exercise of power.

The success of the work rested on Brisley's incorporation of the tableau into an improvisatory framework. The early tableaux were unsuccessful at representing the *relations* between power and knowledge. Brisley's response in **180 Hours – Work for 2 People** (and to a lesser extent **10 Days**) was to create a sequence of images which combined with action and discussion. **180 Hours – Work for 2 People** moved between 'making pictures', breaking those pictures up and commenting on those pictures. The analogy to film is pertinent. Both the improvised work such as **Between** and those works which incorporate fixed images or elements of regulation in the action, use space as a framing device, be it the gallery itself or some form of construction. (Like Grotowskian 'poor' theatre, Brisley's performance uses very few technical resources relying on the sharp or 'raw' delineation of the body in space to compel our attention and excite the imagination). In **Approaches To Learning**, a contest-ritual performed with Iain Robertson in the darkened basement of the Ikon Gallery in 1980, the framing device was a lift-shaft which carried the action into and away from the space, releasing light and blocking it out. 'It's like watching a film. There are a series of sequences which take place in time where the conjunction of one sequence in relation to another begins to operate beyond the sum of its parts'.<sup>16</sup> Brisley's sequences though are not strictly narrative but allegorical. Allegorical meaning resides in the whole and any of its constituent parts. Although we may get a clearer picture of the



whole if we follow the action through to the end it is not necessary in order to understand Brisley's work or be affected by its power. We can 'see' the whole through the single image or action or sequence of images or action. The sustained uneventfulness of much of the action (or highly repetitive action) confirms this. We may return to the work without having 'missed' anything. What is important is how the work comes across at a structural level, whether the central image or images of the work can suggest and sustain a number of different readings.

For political artists it is a matter of course that what one is doing is peeking behind appearances, peeling away the onion of representation; political art in the seventies whether it has followed a structuralist or agitational bent has been a confrontation with commonsense. Its strongest base has been in photography, a medium perfectly suited to examine the politics of classification. Recent performance has tended to examine roles and behaviour; the attraction of performance for women artists has been its critical function as a theatre of subjectivity. For Brisley performance is ideally suited to making *gestures*. 'My activity exists as a kind of gesture which is in recognition of the possibility of change'.<sup>17</sup> How Brisley works – the collaboration, the refusal to play the market – are where the politics lie; what the work 'says', what specific political sights it sets, are governed by this. As such performance has no privileged position; there is no Brisleyian model to adapt; performance is simply the most direct and flexible way of moving between art contexts and social ones. What Brisley has pursued along with a number of other artists who came to political consciousness in the late sixties is a new status for the artist, a status tentatively outlined by Hans Magnus Enzenberger in 1964 in his essay *Constituents of a theory of the Media*. The artist 'must see it as his goal to make himself redundant as a specialist in much the same way as a teacher of literacy only fulfills his task when he is no longer necessary'. Unfashionable words today, but a principle which has guided Brisley's art through the seventies. Brisley is a protean artist whose suspicion of

style and his pursuit of collaborative forms of work has pushed his work into many diverse areas. One activity that underpins all his live-work is his involvement with film. His collaboration with the film-maker Ken McMullen who 'documents' his work has been of primary importance. Retrospectively the performance could be seen as the precondition for film-making. In fact just at that point when Brisley is coming to be known as the doyen of British performance – a view that this exhibition will no doubt confirm – he may well make himself redundant from that position altogether. Recently Brisley has said: 'I need to find something which allows me to conceive of performance in relation to film. If I could do that the necessity to work live would probably diminish'.<sup>18</sup>

1. Stuart Brisley: 'Anti Performance Art' *Arte Inglese Oggi* 1960-76, p.417.
2. Conversation with Brisley: Jan 1981.
3. Michel Foucault: *Discipline and Punish*, Peregrine 1979.
4. Interview with Stuart Brisley by John Roberts, *Artlog*, to be published April-May 1981.
5. Stuart Brisley: 'Environments', *Studio International*, June 1969, p.268.
6. I. M. Lewis: *Social Anthropology in Perspective*, Penguin 1976, p.136.
7. G. S. Kirk: *The Nature of Greek Myths*, Penguin 1974, p.248.
8. Stuart Brisley: unpublished notes to **Approaches to Learning** performed at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, June 1980.
9. Interview with Stuart Brisley by John Roberts, *Artlog*, to be published April-May 1981.
10. Stuart Brisley: 'Environments', *Studio International*, June 1969, p.268.
11. Stuart Brisley: unpublished notes to **180 Hours – Work for 2 People**, Acme Gallery, Sept 1978.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Interview with Stuart Brisley by John Roberts, *Art Monthly*, to be published April/May 1981.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

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