

Introduction

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Critics who advocate an exclusive return to the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture still refer dismissively to 'performance artists who lie in baths full of rotting meat'. In 1972 Stuart Brisley spent two weeks sitting for two hours a day in a bath filled with rotting meat and cold water at Gallery House in Exhibition Road (now the pristine premises of the Goethe Institute). This event made Brisley well known (or notorious) and still serves as an image to encapsulate all performance art in simplified and hostile asides.

It was indeed a memorable performance. Just as it conjures up a powerful image in the minds of those who did not see it, for those who did it remains a memory impossible to forget. It is probably the simplest and most direct event that Brisley has done. Yet it is not typical of his work.

Ironically, the bath piece, *And for today . . . nothing*, was closer to painting (David's *Marat*, Rembrandt's *Soutine*) than any other of Brisley's performances. Recent works, like *180 Hours – Work for Two People* – where Brisley played two 'parts': an anarchic character A and a parsimonious, bureaucratic B – have been closer to theatre, as were many of his earlier performances.

The bath piece was also reminiscent of the actions of Austrian artists like Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus and Otto Mühl, who ritually disembowelled animal carcasses and subjected their own and collaborators' bodies to simulated (and sometimes real) sadistic and masochistic assaults. But Brisley's bath piece was much more controlled and less exhibitionistic. It was also more unpleasant for him, and required more stamina and 'work'. Many of Brisley's recent events have involved feats of endurance and stamina. (Now in his later forties, he is no longer a young man).

Performance art can be appallingly self-indulgent and most of it is. (But nine tenths of painting is bad art). Inevitably in the late sixties and during the seventies many artists who had no talent, nothing to say, jumped aboard the rolling bandwagon of performance. The reaction against it was inevitable. But the best artists have remained and have developed in subtle and complex ways. In Britain, Brisley and Marc Chaimowicz have both progressed and matured as performance artists. Two such different artists working in such different ways demonstrates that performance is a far from limited or limiting medium.

An exhibition which tries to show a performance artist's earlier work is something of a contradiction. Performance is a process through time which leaves no record, apart from the 'documentation' by written, photographic or audio-visual means, or the memory in the spectator's mind. A live performance accompanied by a series of photographic displays, films and videos, is a very different thing from a carefully chosen selection of a

painter's or sculptor's work. The ephemeral nature of the work makes evaluating a performance artist like Brisley difficult. Memory can blur, or fade, or simplify, or make stronger, or weaker. You cannot test out the reality against the original impression as you can by looking at a previously seen painting in a retrospective exhibition. All you have is the 'documentation', and your memories (if you saw the performance). Another problem: hardly any one person can have seen all the works of a performance artist. Not only are the works transitory, they are often performed in inaccessible or diverse places in many different countries.

At the ICA Brisley's live work will be endowed with the accumulated residue of the earlier performance represented by documentation in the gallery. This cannot be easy, either for the spectators or the artist. But then performance, at its highest level, is not easy, demands infinite control, patience, imagination, inner and outer strength, stamina. These are the requisites of the performance artist; the spectator needs some of these qualities too.

To understand Brisley's work it is necessary to know something of his own earlier development. His first mature works were constructions or structures, often made from perspex and other 'new' materials, during the mid-sixties, through works concerned with light (some made in collaboration with Bill Culbert). It is easy now to look back on the kinetic art of the sixties as superficial, tinselly and mechanical. Much was, but the best used movement or light as analogies or models of human experience, or of bodily sensations and mental processes. The next step was for Brisley himself to get into the art. In an interview in 1971 he said: 'I did a lot of perspex structures. I used to get the feeling that I would like to be in them. At that time I was making models of what I've actually made and walked in since'.¹ The move from construction to performance or a combination of the two is not new. Van Doesburg, for instance, took part in Dada performances with Schwitters. The projection of the ideal and the ritualisation of the real are not contradictory.

Many of Brisley's earlier performance works used a large structure or 'life-size' construction which formed the 'stage' or the 'frame' within which he and his collaborators worked. (In his earliest performances Brisley often used whole 'casts' of collaborators). Even as late as 1977, in the work he undertook at the *Hayward Annual* on the gallery's balcony, Brisley used a large structure of this kind.

These structures served to emphasize the control and essential order of Brisley's work. They were the visible representation of the conceptual 'structure' that underlies it. In recent events this structure is often provided not by a physical construction but by a framework of time. The performance

takes place over a set period of days. For example, **10 Days** (performed in Berlin in 1972, and in London in 1978), where for ten days at Christmas time, Brisley sat at the end of a table refusing the meals he was served by a chef, leaving the uneaten food to rot on the table.

Such an event would have a potent symbolism performed at any time of the year. But it gained enormously by being performed over the Christmas period of overeating and conspicuous consumption. Brisley's work is carefully designed to exploit the rightness of time and place. At the Edinburgh Festival in 1971 Brisley hired a car showroom opposite the Usher Hall; those who paused casually to gaze at the brightly polished latest models found instead wrecked cars towed in from crashes over which bandaged figures sprawled and writhed. At the 1977 *Documenta 6* in Kassel he had been allotted a space near the American artist Walter De Maria. De Maria had a huge rig set up in the middle of the Friedrichsplatz, drilling a hole one kilometre deep into which he eventually inserted a five centimetre brass rod, at a cost of approximately £250,000, paid for by a Texas oil millionaire. Brisley removed himself to another part of the town and dug his own hole, by hand, working for days in the hot sun, with the help of a young German collaborator, Christoph Gericke. Although the hole was only two metres deep, the spot he had chosen, near the Orangerie, was one where rubble from buildings destroyed during the war and human victims had been buried. Where they did not encounter rubble or human bones the subsoil was solid clay. At the bottom of the hole Brisley built a wooden structure in which he lived alone for a fortnight. This action was, in part at least, a reaction to the conspicuous consumption of materials, energy, manpower and money nearby.

The previous year Brisley had been artist in residence at the new town of Peterlee in the North East of England. He dug no holes here – there were enough in this mining area – and spent his time encouraging and helping the inhabitants to create an oral history for the new community, based on their own lives and experiences, and the history of the areas from which they had been drawn into the new town. But digging a hole at Kassel and living in a cramped wooden structure underground for a fortnight owed something to the 'community history' and 'communal memory' of Peterlee.

Recently Brisley has become increasingly interested in traditional rituals (of the kind photographed by Homer Sykes in *Once a Year*). Currently he is collaborating with the film-maker Ken McMullen on a film about performance art. Brisley and McMullen have filmed a number of these rituals, including the 'Haxey Hood' in Lincolnshire and the 'Padstow Hobbyhoss' in Cornwall. Many of these rituals are quite violent and act out communal histories and tensions.

At the 1977 *Hayward Annual*, Brisley and Christoph Gericke built a large wooden structure on the balcony of the gallery. For long periods Brisley or his young collaborator were suspended within this structure and had various substances poured over their bodies. For example, Gericke was tied into a kind of strait-jacket hung inside the structure and had plaster poured over him. He was then sluiced down with water from a hose. As an exemplary ritual it was reminiscent of the initiations which apprentices traditionally have to undergo; by analogy to the humiliations the young and unprivileged are subjected to in contemporary society. At other times the roles of the older and younger man were reversed.

Many of Brisley's recent performances have been partly at

least about youth and maturity. (Most of his recent collaborators have been young men approximately half his age). Another example was Brisley's collaboration with Iain Robertson, **Between**, in Amsterdam in 1979. A steep sloping structure of blockboard was constructed in the De Appel gallery in Amsterdam, kept constantly wet to make it slippery. Brisley and Robertson spent long periods each day naked on the slope, trying to remain on the slippery surface without falling or sliding off. The performance emphasised the difference in the two men's ages, and also their physiques (Robertson is considerably taller than Brisley). Sometimes the younger man's greater physical strength put him at an advantage; at other times the older man's experience counted. In **Approaches to Learning** at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham in 1980, performed with the same collaborator, Brisley and the younger man stalked each other through the basement and lift-area of the gallery, subjecting each other's bodies to ritual blows of considerable force.

It should by now be obvious that Brisley's performance art is more complex than 'lying in a bath of rotting meat', even though that was one of his most powerful pieces. It is difficult to see why those critics who have insisted on the continuing expressive possibilities of the human image, transformed through the medium of paint, cannot perceive that the human body itself can be directly transformed in a truly expressive way in performance. The parallels between Brisley's work and the paintings of artists like Auerbach and Kossoff who transform the image of the body by piling it with visceral layers of paint, should be clear. The physicality of the best performance art is very different from the cerebral sterility of most conceptual art with which it is too often conflated.

A year after the bath piece Brisley made a film for the Arts Council, **Arbeit Macht Frei** (Work creates freedom). The film opens with Brisley vomiting in close-up. We do not know why he is being sick. The sequence is physically unpleasant and for some may be impossible to watch. It is succeeded by a long sequence of Brisley's face as he lies almost completely submerged in a bath or tank of water. Much of this is shot through a pane of glass with Brisley's face pressed against it so that his features are distorted and resemble a painting by Francis Bacon. 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. In synopsis it sounds revolting, yet to persist with the film is to receive a powerful cathartic experience. Brisley has turned his own body into an object; virtually emptied it of its humanity. Yet paradoxically the effect, after the gruelling performance is over, is to make one more aware of the humanity of the body, which the film seems superficially to deny. The end result, curiously, is life-affirming. This is true of all Brisley's successful performances, however revolting or degrading the actions to which he submits his own or his collaborators' bodies may seem. This ultimate affirmation is why Brisley is not only one of the best performance artists, but also one of the best artists working now in any medium.

1. Interview with Simon Field, *Art and Artists*, August 1971, p.19.