

Artist Stuart Brisley: shutting up shop on the old politics

Brisley's perversely serious performances show up the absurdity of what's happening at Westminster



Uncertain future ... Gordon Brown. Photograph: Martin Argles for the Guardian

Maybe only a performance artist can come up with an immediate reaction to the current political situation, and maybe only Stuart Brisley, emeritus professor at the Slade and enfant terrible of the art world since the 1960s, is sufficiently versed in the portrayal of the collapse of structures to reflect mordantly on the particular magic of the moment. Last weekend and this one coming, in his long-established persona as RY Sirb, the curator of the Museum of Ordure, he has been occupying two adjacent shops on Hoxton Street in east London – one the respected art gallery known as PEER, the other a forgotten and long-abandoned council property. No prizes for perceiving here a metaphor for the end of the ancien regime of New Labour.

Next Door (the missing subject)

by Stuart Brisley
PEER, London
N1 6QL

Until May 23

Brisley's performances, which often involve intense physical activity demanding huge concentration, have been known to go on for days, and here he has been working away at dismantling the shop, piling up the detritus to his aesthetic satisfaction. In the middle of the room are sheets of hardboard, a long table and a ladder, a structure perilously held together by gravity and faith

over which he crawls to make some minor adjustment with almost perverse seriousness.

The onlooker can observe this activity either through the window on the street, or through a hole cut neatly through the wall into the gallery space next door. Bulletins are pinned up reflecting the artist's daily thoughts, and here too is one of his paintings from some years ago of a grey Prince Charles, his eyes covered with a red oblong. The continuing incongruity of the monarchy has long been one of Brisley's themes, and he comments in a bulletin (and in the title of the show) on its strange absence from the

current discussion about constitutional reform. In the old shop stands a broken mirror and one of his ancient paintings of the Queen herself, in a large hat, a familiar and reassuring presence in a scene of utter hopelessness and futility.

So maybe the artist can help us to understand what is going on around us. The febrile activity of the politicians, the lapdog enthusiasm of the media, the vacuous commentary – what is it all about, exactly? At one level, Brisley is poking fun at the absurdity of constructing a new world using the irrelevant totems of the old. At another, he is making a wider point about the reconstruction of ancient institutions as the world around us is collapsing on every side. New Labour is dead, but how long before its Conservative/Liberal replacement goes the same way? Turning an old shop into an art gallery is not too large a jump. Transforming an old society in a hostile world may be beyond our grasp.