

DOMOBAAL

STUART BRISLEY

THE NAUSEA WAS ENORMOUS – A CONVERSATION WITH SASKIA SCHABON PUBLISHED IN MONOPOL MAGAZINE, 23 JUNE 2010

STUART BRISLEY'S RADICAL, SOCIALLY CRITICAL WORK HAS PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INSTALLATION AND PERFORMANCE ART. THE ENGLISHMAN WHO WAS BORN IN 1933 HAS FREQUENTLY CHALLENGED THE LIMITS OF HIS BODY - FOR EXAMPLE DURING DOCUMENTA VI IN KASSEL WHERE HE LIVED FOR TWO WEEKS IN A HOLE IN THE GROUND. HE NOW HAS HIS FIRST SOLO-SHOW IN GERMANY FOR 20 YEARS.

SS

MR BRISLEY - PERFORMANCE ART WAS AT ITS HEIGHT IN THE 60S AND 70S. TODAY THERE IS A REVIVAL OF THIS ART FORM. WHY IS THAT?

SB

I HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA REALLY. WHAT THIS REVIVAL REALLY MEANS TODAY IS A GOOD QUESTION. WHAT IS IT BASED ON? EARLIER WORK, EARLIER PERFORMANCES? THE EVENTS, PERFORMANCES AND HAPPENINGS OF THE 60S AND 70S AND EARLY 80S BECAME AN INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT. WHAT IS HAPPENING TODAY IS NOT AT THAT LEVEL. IF THERE IS A REVIVAL TODAY THEN IT IS AN ART MARKET PHENOMENON - SOMETHING ESSENTIALLY DIFFERENT.

SS

MORE THAN HALF A MILLION PEOPLE VISITED MARINA ABRAMOVIC'S RETROSPECTIVE EARLIER THIS YEAR IN NEW YORK'S MOMA. DANCERS AND ACTORS PERFORMED ONE OF HER MOST IMPORTANT PERFORMANCES. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS 'RE-ENACTMENT'?

SB

A DIFFICULT NOTION - VERY CONTRADICTORY. EVEN IN THE THEATRE, WHERE THEY AIM TO PERFORM PLAYS THAT CONFORM TO THE WISHES OF THE AUTHOR THERE ARE UNPLANNED CHANGES. ONE EVENING IT WORKS THE NEXT ONE IT DOES NOT. THERE IS A QUALITATIVELY FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A FIRST PERFORMANCE AND REPEATS. I ONLY ONCE DID A RE-ENACTMENT BUT NOT REALLY - IT IS BASICALLY IMPOSSIBLE. TAKE FOR EXAMPLE MY WORK 'SURVIVAL IN ALIEN CIRCUMSTANCES' THAT I DID AT DOCUMENTA VI IN KASSEL. I DUG A HOLE IN THE GROUND FOR TWO WEEKS AND THEN LIVED IN THAT HOLE FOR ANOTHER TWO WEEKS. WHEN DIGGING I CAME ACROSS HUMAN BONES WHICH COMPLETELY CHANGED THE MEANING OF THE WORK. SUDDENLY IT HAD BECOME A WORK ABOUT GERMAN HISTORY.

SS

HOW DO YOU MEAN?

SB

IN THE BEGINNING I WAS INTERESTED IN THE IDEA OF LIVING UNDERGROUND. THE IDEA CAME AFTER WORKING WITH MINERS FOR ABOUT 18 MONTHS TO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT FROM MAKING ART. I TALKED WITH A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO VISITED DOCUMENTA AND ASKED THEM WHETHER THEY KNEW WHAT WAS GOING ON HERE? MOST THOUGHT IT WAS A MASS GRAVE. NO ONE WOULD HAVE ANSWERED THAT WAY HAD I DONE THE SAME WORK IN ENGLAND BECAUSE OF A DIFFERENT HISTORY AND A DIFFERENT COLLECTIVE MEMORY. THAT WAS VERY INTERESTING TO EXPERIENCE. BUT HOW CAN YOU REPEAT SOMETHING LIKE THAT? IF I WERE TO DIG A SECOND HOLE IN KASSEL, ONE WOULD PROBABLY FIND SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT.

SS

YOU DO ALL YOUR PERFORMANCES YOURSELF. MANY OF YOUR FELLOW ARTISTS DON'T BUT INSTEAD USE ACTORS.

SB

THAT CAN WORK. BUT I DON'T FIND THAT VERY INTERESTING. I DON'T HOLD A PARTICULAR VIEW FOR OR AGAINST THAT APPROACH. PERFORMANCE ART IS A BROAD CHURCH. I HAVE ALWAYS CONSIDERED PERFORMANCE ART AS AN ALTERNATIVE TAKE ON THE VISUAL ARTS. PERFORMANCE ART BREAKS THE RIGIDITY OF THE VISUAL ARTS YET IS BASED ON ITS TRADITIONS. PERFORMANCE ART TRIES TO DISSOLVE THE FIXED BOUNDARIES BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL MEDIA.

SS

IN YOUR PERFORMANCE '10 DAYS' YOU HANDED YOUR FOOD OUT TO PEOPLE WHO CAME TO WATCH BUT STARVED YOURSELF. HOW DO YOU RATE THIS INTERACTION WITH THE PUBLIC?

SB

LET ME ILLUSTRATE THIS WITH THIS LITTLE STORY. IT WAS IN THE SIXTIES. ONE OF MY GALLERISTS LOVED FOX HUNTING. ONE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS ON A HUNT WITH HIS HORSE, HE TRIED TO JUMP A FENCE. THE HORSE FELL, FELL ON TOP OF HIM AND HE DIED AND I NO LONGER HAD A GALLERIST. THE QUESTION THAT AROSE IN ME WAS NOT HOW DO I FIND A NEW GALLERIST BUT HOW CAN I ENGAGE WITH THE PUBLIC WITHOUT SUCH AN INTERMEDIARY.

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SS

HOW DO PEOPLE REACT TO YOU DURING A PERFORMANCE?

THEY OFTEN EXPERIENCE IT AS A PROVOCATION. THE ROYAL COURT THEATRE IN LONDON WHICH AT THE TIME HAD AN AVANT-GARDE REPUTATION ORGANISED A FESTIVAL IN 1969 CALLED 'COME TOGETHER'. THE IDEA WAS TO SHOW WHAT THEY REGARDED AS EXPERIMENTAL WORK. I HAD BEEN INVITED AS WELL. BEFORE IT STARTED - THE CURTAIN WAS STILL DRAWN AND PEOPLE WERE IN THEIR SEATS - THEY PLAYED 'GOD SAVE THE QUEEN' AND OUT OF RESPECT PEOPLE GOT UP. THE CURTAIN WENT UP AND PEOPLE SAT DOWN. WE PLAYED 'GOD SAVE THE QUEEN' AGAIN AND THE PEOPLE GOT UP AGAIN. WE PLAYED IT AGAIN BUT PEOPLE WERE GETTING A BIT UNEASY. AND AGAIN BUT THEN PEOPLE EXPRESSED ANGER AND SOME JUST SAT DOWN. WE PLAYED IT AGAIN AND SOME OF US STOOD ON OUR HEADS - AS AN ASIDE I FAVOUR A REPUBLIC - AND IT ALL ENDED IN CHAOS. LATER PEOPLE ACCUSED ME OF DAMAGING THE THEATRE'S REPUTATION. I WANTED TO EXPOSE THE LACK OF TRUE DEMOCRACY IN OUR SOCIETY. THE QUEEN IS STILL ABOVE POLITICS, SHE IS THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN APPOINT OR DISSOLVE PARLIAMENT. THAT IS NOT DEMOCRATIC. THERE ARE SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED.

SS

YOU BELIEVE THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO UNDERSTAND THESE SPECTACULAR EVENTS WHEN THEY ARE SHOWN AS PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTS?

SB

I DON'T REALLY CONSIDER THEM AS DOCUMENTS BUT MORE AS INTERPRETATIONS OF MY WORK. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF VARIATIONS OF THE SAME MOMENT. IT IS OPEN TO DISCUSSION WHETHER OR NOT THESE INTERPRETATIONS ARE ART. IN THE BEGINNING I NEVER HAD THE PERFORMANCE FILMED OR PHOTOGRAPHED BUT LEFT IT ALL TO MEMORY. BUT WE ALL KNOW THAT YOU CANNOT RELY ON YOUR RECOLLECTION OF PARTICULAR EVENTS. DESPITE THAT I BELIEVE THAT SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED BETWEEN ARTIST AND VIEWER WHEN A PARTICULAR PERFORMANCE IS REMEMBERED. PEOPLE MAY REMEMBER DIFFERENT THINGS BUT IN ANY CASE THERE IS SOME KIND OF EXPERIENCE THAT IS SHARED. OUR BODIES RECONSTITUTE THEMSELVES EVERY SEVEN YEARS - SO MAYBE OUR MEMORIES AND SOULS CHANGE AS WELL.

SS

IS IT BECAUSE OF THAT THAT YOU PUT YOUR OWN HEALTH AT RISK DURING A PERFORMANCE? TO PROLONG THE MEMORY WITH THE INTRUSIVENESS OF WHAT YOU SHOW?

SB

WELL - IT WAS NEVER REALLY DANGEROUS. IT JUST LOOKED LIKE THAT. IN 1972 I DID SOME WORK IN THE GOETHE INSTITUT IN LONDON. I HAD A SHOW IN A GALLERY NEARBY THAT WAS LINKED TO THE INSTITUTE. THERE FOR MY PERFORMANCE 'AND FOR TODAY...NOTHING' I SOILED THE BATHROOM - A CLEAN SPACE THAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE KEPT CLEAN - COMPLETELY. THE BASIN WAS FILLED WITH EXCREMENT, THE BATH WAS FILLED WITH BLACK WATER. THE LIGHT HAD BEEN SWITCHED OFF AND THE WINDOW BLACKED OUT. I WAS DRESSED ALL IN BLACK AND ALL YOU COULD SEE WAS MY HEAD ABOVE THE WATER AND THE SLIGHT DISTURBANCE OF THE WATER CAUSED BY MY BREATHING. I WAS IN THERE FOR TWO AND A HALF HOURS. THE NAUSEA IT EVOKED IN THE VIEWERS WAS ENORMOUS. HALF THE PEOPLE COULD NOT WATCH WHILST OTHERS WERE FASCINATED. SEEN FROM AFAR IT LOOKED AS IF THE BATH WAS FILLED WITH INTESTINES WHICH IN REALITY WERE ONLY LATEX COPIES. IT WAS THE ILLUSION THAT MADE EVERYTHING LOOK SO GROSS AND DISGUSTING.

STUART BRISLEY: MEASUREMENT AND DIVISION, GALERIE EXILE, BERLIN, UNTIL JULY 10TH. AT 19 HOURS ON JUNE 26TH THERE WILL BE A DISCUSSION BETWEEN BRISLEY AND ANDREW WILSON, CURATOR, TATE, LONDON.