

## FEATURE

Artist interview

# An enfant terrible at 80: Stuart Brisley

After decades of radical, confronting performance pieces, the artist makes a return to painting. By **Louisa Buck**

**A**lthough he celebrates his 80th birthday this year, Stuart Brisley still has a reputation as an art-world enfant terrible. A pioneer of the most violently demanding of durational performance art, for more than 60 years Brisley has made work that directly and often disturbingly challenges established social and cultural conventions. For what is probably his best-known work, *And For Today, Nothing*, 1972, Brisley lay partially submerged for two hours a day for two weeks in a bath of cold, black liquid surrounded by rotting offal. Another notable work, for Documenta 6 in 1977, *Survival in Alien Circumstances*, involved Brisley digging a hole in which to make a place to live for two weeks, in the process excavating rubble and human remains from the Second World War. More recently, his ten-day action, *The Missing Text*, which began at Peer art space in 2010, found the artist taking up residence in a derelict shop in Hackney, London, and piling the detritus left by three bankrupt businesses into a colossal heap—a live action that also spawned a film, photographs and a series of paintings.

For many years a professor of fine art media at the Slade School of Fine Art, Brisley was the only member of staff to be directly appointed by the student body. His former pupils include Mona Hatoum, Douglas Gordon, Zarina Bhimji and Hayley Newman. This month, he has two London exhibitions opening, at Domobaal and Mummery + Schnelle.

**The Art Newspaper:** You are best known as a performance artist but paintings feature prominently in both your London exhibitions: at Domobaal, you are showing watercolours of landscapes, and a major part of your Mummery + Schnelle show is a suite of oil paintings from your performance work *The Missing Text*.

**Stuart Brisley:** My beginnings as an artist were with notions of realism. I was influenced by artists from Lucian Freud to Cranach, but by my last year at the Royal College [of Art] in 1959, I had given up figurative painting and had got to the point where the actual material substance became the subject of the work. Then I gave up painting for 15 years when I was doing the full-blooded performance thing, but now I feel that we have come to a position where Modernism is not the only hero on the walk. It is interesting that what has re-emerged is something that was actually not very modern in its own terms when I started but now there are other ways of thinking. I will use whatever medium I need to make what I want to make; you can put a piece of paint down and suddenly it does more than one thing: it's really fascinating how it operates. Also it's a language that is immediately recognisable to most Western people.

**The scenes you paint in *Jerusalem* are overgrown, neglected and the opposite of arcadia.**

I always like to start with things that are very commonplace, in whatever form, and I thought of Blake's "Jerusalem", which has become like a second national anthem and presents a future vision of a kind of pastoral utopia. I wanted to find images that represent a sense of country and, at the same time, the changed attitudes that we now have in relation to the country. For example, you can also see a painting with a fallen tree and shrubs which have been left to their own devices as a positive image of the natural regeneration of the landscape, allowing nature to find its own path. There is a lot of ambivalence in the imagery and that sort of ambiguity is something that I am very interested in.

**Alongside the *Jerusalem* paintings, you are also creating a new ten-day performance based on the Republican calendar introduced after the French Revolution, so you are in the gallery for a Republican hour, which is 2.4 hours, every day for a ten-day Republican week.**

One of the things that appealed to me was the connection between the idea of a revolution and the making of a performance—in both you start from scratch on day one and the intention is to make something completely new. But of course in both cases, nothing changes completely on day one, everyone is still the same as they were before. I'm interested in that relationship, because if you start a performance you are starting something new, and then there comes the realisation of the limits that one has unconsciously set up for oneself, and—albeit in a much bigger sense—revolutions also have a tendency to become something other than themselves, don't they?

**This performance may not be as gruelling as some of your earlier works but it is still physically and mentally exacting. Why is it necessary to push yourself to such extremes?** I have to take responsibility for the whole and to do it absolutely 100% as far as I can, and in the earlier works, this meant using the whole of me. In some of the works, the performance went beyond my control and once I recognised this, it became something that I aimed for. So, the duration of the work enabled me to reach a point where I had to go beyond myself. I am also very much aware of the superficiality of didactic political statements and I absolutely try to avoid that. One of the ways of doing this is to make

## Biography

## STUART BRISLEY

**Born:** 1933, Haselmere, Surrey, UK  
**Education:** Guildford School of Art, 1949-54; Royal College of Art, London, 1956-59; Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Munich, 1959-60; Florida State University, Tallahassee, 1960-62  
**Lives and works:** London, Dungeness and Istanbul  
**Represented by:** Domobaal, London; Mummery + Schnelle, London  
**Selected solo shows:** 1975 Kunst Forum, Rottweil 1976 Battersea Arts Centre, London 1981 Spacex Gallery, Exeter, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and ICA, London 1987 Serpentine Gallery, London 1986 Third Eye Centre, Glasgow 1993 Museum of Modern Art, Oxford 1996 South London Gallery, London 1998 The Altes Schlachthaus, Bern 2002 Freud Museum, London 2004 Catalyst Arts, Belfast 2010 Peer, London 2013 Mummery + Schnelle, London  
**Selected group shows:** 1968-69 Camden Arts Centre, London 1977 Documenta 6, Kassel, 1977 Hayward Gallery, London 1985 São Paulo Biennale 1987 "British Art in the Twentieth Century", Royal Academy of Arts, London 1993 "The Sixties Art Scene in London", Barbican Art Gallery, London 1995 "25 Years of British Sculpture", Serpentine Gallery, London 2000 "Live in Your Head", Whitechapel Art Gallery, London 2004 "Hortus: Botany and Empire", Liverpool Biennale 2011 "Modern British Sculpture", Royal Academy of Arts, London

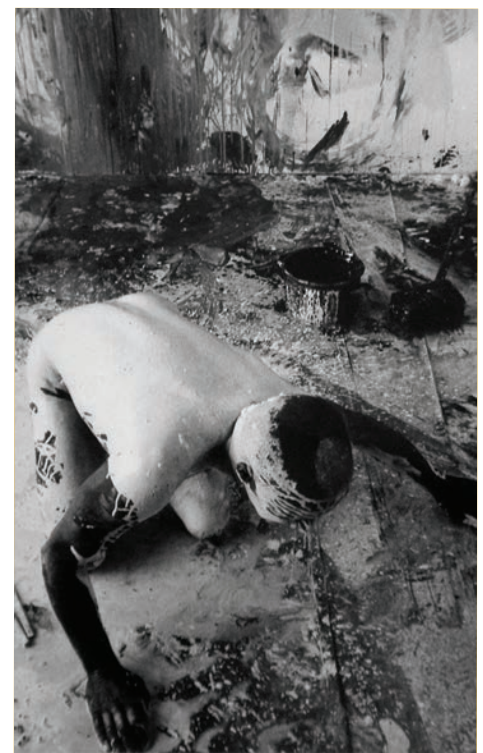
works where you actually have to go beyond yourself into areas that are not prescribed or thought of and then acted out.

**You may be keen to avoid being didactic, but your work has always been underpinned by a close and often highly critical involvement with social and political issues, and an opposition to social hierarchies. This has extended from helping to lead the famous 1968 sit-in at Hornsey School of Art, to working with miners in the North East (Peterlee Project—History Within Living Memory, 1976-77) and, more recently, a multimedia exploration of the detritus of three failed businesses during the 2010 election (*The Missing Text*, 2010-13). What are the origins of this passionate commitment to challenging the establishment status quo?**

It's difficult to make direct analogies and to know where emotion comes from; I've been like this right from the very beginning. I grew up in a very socialist context—I remember we were all given these little Soviet badges when the Soviet Union became an ally in the war. Then there were all the different experiences of the violence of war as a child. Some were very direct—one day I looked out of the window and saw a Messerschmitt coming down with one wing missing—and some were secondary, but they were all accretive. Our school was a very liberal grammar school and we had a lot of Jewish students from the Kindertransport and some German Jewish teachers. When Belsen was liberated after the war, we were taken to the cinema to see the newsreels so that we should never forget it; I was about 12. Later, after I finished at the Royal College [of Art], I was a student in Munich where there were connections with the new Bauhaus. Then I went to Florida State University and taught at Cornell in the early 60s in the Kennedy period. Put all of that, and a great deal more, together—this is what I came out of.

**Why did you turn to performance?**

I was thrown out of the [United] States because I'd overstayed my visa and when I came back in 1964, I got a job at Hornsey School of Art. That came to an end with the sit-in in 1968. I arrived at a point where I thought: "What do I do now? What is the basis on which I can work? Is there a basis on which I can work?" Then, I hit on the idea that it had to be about everyday life. I wasn't interested in whether it was art or not, that really



Stills from *You Know It Makes Sense*, 1972 (top) and *Moments of Decision/Indecision*, 1975

wasn't the issue. So, the idea came to think about what are the most basic things that we all do as people? And that's why the very first action I made, *White Meal*, 1966, was about eating; it was bringing everything back to an everyday common mode of living and being.

**Performance is very much back in fashion. Do you feel any connection with some of today's big names in performance, like Tino Sehgal or Marina Abramovic?**

No, performance is very different now. As far as Abramovic is concerned, I think she is a gigantic construction, like Warhol, but less so. The institutionalisation that I've always been very ambivalent about now has an overpowering demand on the production of spectacle, which has very little to do with me. For me, performance is an arena of speculation, it's a temporary condition that I then use in order to make things that last longer.

• Stuart Brisley, Domobaal, London, 4 October-30 November and Mummery + Schnelle, London, 16 October-30 November



*The Missing Text, Interregnum 1* (6 May-12 May 2010), 2012, one of Brisley's paintings created from his performance piece