

THE INCIDENTAL COLLECTION - STUART BRISLEY'S PETERLEE PROJECT

By Marc Crinson , 9 September 2004

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With an eager hoovering up of community memory now a built in part of every self-respecting regeneration project, the exhibition of Stuart Brisley's pioneering 1970s archival project in the New Town and former mining district of Peterlee is not only timely but inspiring, says Mark Crinson

The Peterlee Project, 1976-2004, Vardy Art Gallery, University of Sunderland, 9 March to 2 April

In 1976 the performance artist, Stuart Brisley, took up an artist's placement in Peterlee New Town. In retrospect, it appears an unlikely combination. On the one hand there was Peterlee, then still in its Development Corporation phase but originally a 1940s vision of a 'miners' capital' in the east Durham coalfield. Its first architect/planner, the Russian émigré modernist Berthold Lubetkin, had proposed modernist blocks linked by screens to suggest the local terraced houses, with other civic buildings zoned and placed strategically so as to develop concentrically and emphasise the saucer of land. But Lubetkin famously retreated to pig farming, disillusioned and defeated by official hubris and inter-ministerial wrangling. Pragmatism ensued: the town eventually built is mostly indistinguishable from other pallid developments of the time. The memory of terraces was left behind in favour of suburban semis and detached houses; the slagheaps were out of sight, the houses no longer huddled as mining camps around the pithead but scattered among the spacious green areas of the New Town. A few new industries were attracted to take up the slack of the worked-out mine seams: first, potato crisps, clothing and building firms, then more recently, but never adequately, service industries and Japanese car companies. Denied the facilities that might make it a centripetal force, the town also lacks any embodiment of its relation to the area's past.

On the other hand, Brisley had achieved notoriety by 1976 as an English rival to the masculine performance aesthetics of Chris Burden or the Viennese Actionists. Brisley had used his body in cathartic rituals, unpleasant tests of endurance and rigidly staged tableaux: sitting in a bath filled with rotting meat and cold water, refusing meals served to him for ten days before Christmas while watching the food decay on the table. Little suggests a sympathy between Brisley's practice and Peterlee. Yet, unlike his contemporaries, Brisley's performances used allegory to displace self-expression in preference of commentaries on consumption and concise figurations of the immanent effects of power. (After Peterlee, his performances often reflected on communal histories in the face of larger corporate or political imperatives, some even based on equivalents to the physical actions of mining.) There was a conversational dimension in the performances themselves, unrehearsed and flirting with failure, yet insistently dependent on the audience's presence.

The Peterlee work was set up by the Artist Placement Group, of which Brisley had been a founder member in 1966. The usual brief for APG artists was to work as 'creative thinkers' in industrial or government contexts (Esso, the DHSS, the Scottish Office, or, as in Brisley's earlier placement, the Hille Furniture Company), always conceiving of the artist as an 'Incidental Person' interjected into the relations of production and administration. Brisley accepted that being an artist was useless to the people of Peterlee. Despite its early ideals, residents had not participated in the making of Peterlee and had little say in its final effects: they could not even choose the colour of their front doors. They needed more control over their environment and an active sense of its relation to the history and memory of the area. So Brisley set up community workshops (eventually vetoed by the Development Corporation) and began collecting photographs and interviews covering the period from 1900 to 1976.

Archival projects are often associated with moments of traumatic or epochal change, the sundering of communities from their pasts as larger imperatives of planning and economic change supervene. But if Brisley's project appears simply to populate a *tabula rasa* with a past made obsolete by development, then its pioneering aspect is missed. As oral history, for instance, it is placed somewhere between the History from Below movement of the 1960s and the academic respectability given to oral history in the late 1970s, with some acknowledged influence from the Hackney Writers' Group. It was essential that the artist be 'incidental'; that local people provide the images and do the interviews as active repositories of collective memory rather than as subject of official 'history'. Brisley's project also challenged an assumption that was intrinsic to Peterlee's development and indeed to other artist residencies in New Towns: the belief that either the New Town or the existing wider area (here a close-knit group of mining villages) lacked culture and recreation, and that they needed supplementing if not replacing by imported cultural forms which would help generate community. This is apparent in the work of Peterlee's previous town artist, Victor Pasmore, who had been appointed as consultant to the town's planners in 1955, a sop to the loss of architectural vision that had gone with Lubetkin's resignation. Pasmore left behind a group of abstract houses similar in clustered pattern-making to his contemporary painting and intended to be experienced kinetically, but alien to the climate and community. There was also a pavilion that, judging from its recent use in an artwork by Jane and Louise Wilson and a display at the Architectural Association, is now regarded as Peterlee's monument to 'good modernism'.

The recent exhibition at the Vardy Gallery offers a chance to reassess Brisley's placement, even if it belongs to another era beyond the watershed of the 1984 Miners' Strike. The photographs of the area, collected by local people and re-photographed at the time, appear in the display all as the same size, mounted, and grouped by local village. So, while they lose the specific contexts of their highly localised social uses as photographic objects, they gain representative value as standing for an organic locality, the village as anthropological place. Structured into the archive, therefore, *Kultur* is seen to resist *Wissenschaft*. The archive shows that there is no necessary contradiction between historical disclosure and the pleasures of nostalgia, just as it is possible to find a line between heroicising the voices of the past and seeing them as victims. Certainly this past has plenty of strikes, mining disasters and tales of extreme physical duress; yet these are troubles that are part of a wider photographic commemoration. This greater experience constantly intersects with larger narratives: the visit of the King of Uganda in 1912, the General Strike, coronation parties, the opening of pithead baths. But the lost paradise or industrial pastoral of this photographic memory is a place above all of the collective – whether it be miners posing with lamps at their feet, children in streets, local operatic societies, colliery ragtime and marching bands, seaside revellers, female weightlifters, carnivals, leek shows and whippet clubs. Necessarily (almost) absent from the archive, then, is Peterlee itself.

Two issues arise from reconsidering the Peterlee Project. One is where the archive can go from here. Over the last 27 years it has remained largely dormant in the local council offices. There must be some doubt about whether it can offer more than local or family history, although another collecting campaign might tackle the Miners' Strike and Peterlee's history, reactivating them in a dialogue with the present. The other issue is what is retrievable from a moment of art history sometimes derided as merely well-meaning ('Art for Whom?', 'Art For All') and whose radical potential is either buried under successive strata of more spectacular commodified art or diluted by the artist residencies that now accompany most regeneration strategies. The issues are linked in the meditations on collecting that ramify through Brisley's recent work. Here the idea of 'collection' itself offers notions of accumulation, eccentric or systematic, as well as of the regular removal of refuse; the entropy that might reduce prized specimens to abject dust, as well as the curative role assumed by those who act as custodians of collections. It may be from such ideas that the Peterlee Project can find its future as the Incidental Collection.

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