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Stuart Brisley: Measurement and Division
by Mara Goldwyn

Measurement and Division

Exile
Alexandrinenstr 4, HH, 10969 Berlin/Kreuzberg,
Germany
June 12, 2010 - July 10, 2010



How much does an art performance cost? Can you put a price tag on a past event? Buy a memory?

Peering at the price list for works displayed at Exile’s exhibition “Stuart Brisley: Measurement and Division”—which included a five-figure tag for a DVD film of a 1978 performance in London involving the artist slithering naked through rotting food after fasting for 10 days – I at first wondered what exactly was for sale.



Now, I am by no means launching accusations of “selling out”, or chiding the gallery for capitalizing on that which cannot be bought or sold. I understand someone has got to put their hands into the muddy water of financing so that maligned or forgotten artists—as is Brisley’s case in Germany—can get the audience they deserve. Rather, those euro signs blinking light from the pricelist lit a path for me into Brisley’s oeuvre.

The commodification of experience is an ever-present concern in the English artist’s work, which has encompassed performance, writing, sculpture, installation, “curating” and collecting for over fifty years. The performances, which often entail pressing up against the limits of human physical endurance, make a distinctive social commentary on the extent to which power is internalized and controls the body of its subject, and, indeed, how the market infects experience and consequently, the work of art.

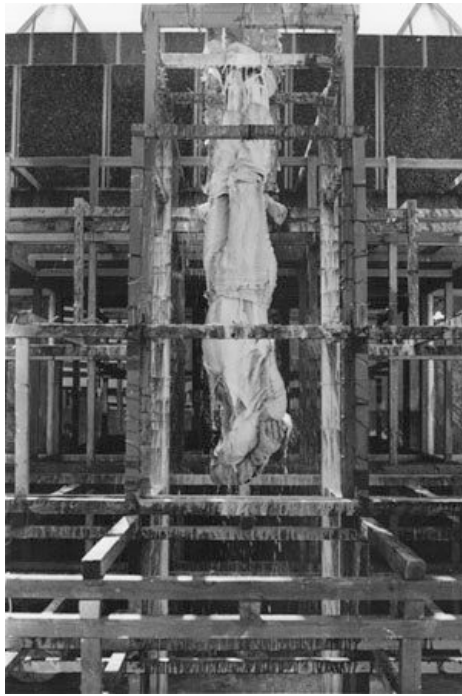
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Measurement and Division (1977), displayed in a choppy 9-minute video, has the artist suspended in a wooden grid, manipulated by an assistant and doused with unidentified liquid substances, bringing to mind how much structures—in all senses of the word—determine the lives of people, often under the guise of free will.

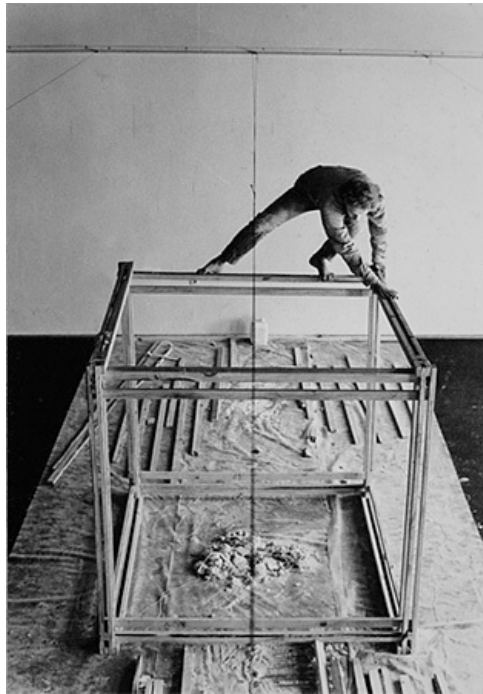


There can also be a great element of contingency in the Brisley's work—what he calls “beneficial blunders” after Žižek—that takes what starts as deadpan ritual and later collapses it into an instructive chaos. An example is *Survival Under Alien Circumstances* (1977), a performance created with Christoph Gerick for Documenta VI. The two dug a hole in Kassel the intention of “creating a place to live in for two weeks”. Before they unexpectedly reached water and could dig no more, they encountered fragments of human remains and war detritus, literally hitting their shovel up against German history. Mud, excrement and rot run through Brisley's work at every turn, as in the 1996 “painting”, *Royal Ordure*, which appears to be flung shit (euphemized as

“mixed media”) encased in a Windsor frame.



In Brisley’s varied career, shit *can* be sellable art while other material artifacts remain just out of reach. The 70s-era performances in Exile’s exhibition are only observable to those of us in the present through tantalizing snippets from cobbled-together photos taken by chance, or 30-year-old Super 8 film that happened to not deteriorate.



It’s clear that the performances were not for the camera or ultimately for the collector, in the traditional sense. They make no neat little package to be exchanged for any sort of capital. The only box around these pieces, it seems—as as in *12 days*, (1977)—in one that is intended to disintegrate or be destroyed, leaving just a trace in the imagination.

I am grateful to the Exile gallery for gathering those traces into a succinct and intelligent introduction into Brisley's career. But I'm still lightly chewing on the question of money. With so little evidence of the work available to be hung on a wall, I was musing –perhaps misguidedly – if the price-tagging of performance art is tantamount to fabricating hearers so that we can ensure that the proverbial tree made a sound.

~ *Mara Goldwyn, a writer living in Berlin.*

(Images: **Stuart Brisley**, *10 Days, Performance*, (Photographs by Inge Lommatsch). Archival inkjet print from vintage slide, 16.5 x 27 cm, 2010; *Measurement and Division*, Performance (with Christoph Gericke), Hayward Gallery, London, 1977; *Survival in Alien Circumstances*, Performance (with Christoph Gericke), Documenta VI, Kassel, 1977 (Photographs by Jann Anderson) Vintage silver gelatin print, 33 x 22 cm, 1977; *Royal Ordure*, Mixed media on canvas in custom frame, 170 x 140 cm, 1996; *12 Days*, Performance, Kunst Forum, Rottweil, 1977 (photographs by Lesley Haslam), Vintage silver gelatin print, 29 x 20 cm, 1977; Courtesy of the artist and Exile gallery)

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