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"How far is it possible to be removed from immanent social engagement while dealing with what is all around the house, the street? The street is chaos reined in, only dimly perceived as when blood stains lead nowhere."¹

Over the past few years, Stuart Brisley has photographed with increasing regularity two specific environments in inner London and the occasional objects and people that exist within them. A first series, based on Georgiana Street near King's Cross, where Brisley lived and worked for several years, formed part of an institution which the artist created for himself and labelled The Georgiana Collection. This complex body of work encompassing sculpture, installation, performance and sound-work as well as photographs originated in an anterior decision by the artist to base his work on his immediate environment. More recently, Brisley has frequented a down-at-heels market at the north end of Brick Lane in Whitechapel as well as adjacent areas of the inner city and the Prenzlauer Berg district of (previously East) Berlin, to which he has returned several times. Whilst the status of the photographs within The Georgiana Collection remained ambiguous — documentation, artwork, or both? — these recent photographs occupy a prominent position within Brisley's current enquiry and are unambiguously presented as single pictures within an extended, ongoing series.

To call Brisley's works "street photographs" is not incorrect. The immediate environment of the street is his studio, and indeed he works with the hand-held Leica which has been the faithful servant of the street photographer for over fifty years. Furthermore Brick

Lane, and similar street markets in East End of London, have been photographed so regularly that the accumulation of images constitutes a historical index of the evolution of this photographic convention — from candid camera photographs in the late 19th century, through to Moholy-Nagy's *The streetmarkets of London* published in 1936, the researches of Nigel Henderson in and around Bethnal Green (also East London) between 1948 and 1953 and most recently Marketa Luskacova's patient study of Brick Lane undertaken throughout the late 1980s. Yet to evoke such a tradition serves primarily to establish Brisley's resistance to, and distance from, its conventions. As anthropological documents of the habits and customs of Londoners, these photographs are comparatively illegible. As tools for sociological argument, they remain opaque and partial. They are evidence of an artist's preoccupation rather than a photographer's document.

Brisley does not descend upon this part of Brick Lane with a view to excising surprising images from the action around him: his attempt to find and give meaning amongst the discarded and displayed objects demands a slower process. In these photographs, any anthropological emphasis has been displaced by the austerity of the space Brisley has created. We might call this a dramatised space, with the proviso that this is not drama in the sense of action, but a muted drama of display and exchange in which silence and stasis are predominant. Where there are figures, they are absorbed into the grey fabric of the street. More often they are absent, represented by vestiges, those things which protect, accommodate and condition them. The objects, chairs and clothes, unimportant in themselves, have acquired a density and a fateful presence. They are waiting, suspended in space and time. And, as Martin Esslin commented on *Waiting for Godot*, it is "in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of time in its purest, most evident form."²

The allusion to Beckett (or equally to Grotowski's "Theatre of the Poor") would be unsurprising to those familiar with several of the notable performance and installation works Brisley realised through the 1970s, for example *10 Days in Berlin* in 1972 and in London in 1978 when, through a ten day pre-Christmas period, Brisley sat at the head of a table upon which successive meals were served, declined and subsequently laid along the table as a decomposing catalogue of consumption: *Survival in Alien Circumstances* at Documenta in Kassel in 1977, where Brisley existed for two weeks in a waterlogged hole which he and a collaborator had dug into the ground with their hands, partly in response to the work by Walter de Maria in which a brass rod was inserted into a hole drilled one kilometre into the ground; and *Leaching out* at and from the Intersection at the ICA in London in 1981, in which Brisley brought a bag of refuse collected each day in Georgiana Street into the ICA gallery and arranged the sorted contents on tables and the floor. Each of these works extended over long periods in which incident was minimal. The viewer was exposed to the slow and inevitable action of time. This process was accentuated in each work by Brisley's establishment of an explicit relationship between institutional and behavioural structures — between ways of codifying and controlling — and their eventual

corruption. Such a relationship remains implicit in the present photographs from Brick Lane and East Berlin. Indeed, through the past twenty years, Brisley's iconography through a wide range of media has remained remarkably persistent: the piles of rags, the crumpled boxes, rows of used clothes and the discarded tools of institutionalised life; quotidian habits and mundane rituals. All of these are apparent in the photographs made in Brick Lane as in the installations described above. Brisley understands the market in Brick Lane as an institution dominated by the habit of inspection and the rite of exchange enacted within a space whose coherence threatens to disintegrate at any time. It is only habit and ritual which provide some kind of temporary safeguard against this imminent collapse. Beckett was acutely aware of the importance of habit. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir called it "a great deadener" and in his book on Proust, Beckett wrote — "Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations... represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being."³

In Brisley's pictures, we are confronted with a paradoxical space — a space located both at the edge of capitalism, and at its very heart. Where there is exchange, it is the desultory exchange of the dispossessed, or of those who have never possessed. Where there is acquisition, it is fuelled by basic need rather than the desire for a new lifestyle. Where there is or has been order — stacking, lining, organising, placing, accumulating — it has been or will be overwhelmed by the action of entropy.

As in the slow-moving tableaux of the performances, Brisley's attention to composition in these photographs is paramount. The stilled drama is achieved through the careful positioning of object in relation to space and perspective. Brisley composes a form in which the decomposition of the street (and by extension all forms of organisation) can be made manifest, yet from which the pictured objects are temporarily wrested. Like the street, the photographs are "chaos reined in." Through the elimination of action and anecdote, and the compression of experience within these objects and surfaces, Brisley's pictures achieve a provisional stability which makes the viewer acutely aware of the passage of time. The chair will be moved, the pile of rags will be sifted through and will grow or diminish. The street may occasionally be cleared. Only the integrity of the picture suspends the subject from its inevitable disintegration, its imminent collapse.

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