

Stuart Brisley Headwinds

30 January – 26 April 2015

THE MAC
Exhibition
Guide £1

Stuart Brisley

Headwinds

The practice of writing is wholly insufficient when engaging with the work of Stuart Brisley: it feels reductive, laborious and much too inert when set against the multiplicities – both contained and uncontained – of his creations. Aside from the movement of fingers, the blinking of eyelids and the adjustment of posture, writing is a very still practice that often tips us too far out of the world of sensation and into the caverns of reason, cognition and intelligibility. How lucky, then, that Brisley's work forces us to engage ourselves entirely – our mutating bodies as well as our restless minds – as we negotiate our physical proximity to these shapes. Reason will only be welcome here if it works in tandem with sensation, and both will only work together if they are open to being disturbed, overturned and made anxious. Any act of interpretation in front of Brisley's art (e.g. 'this represents the corruption of the media', or 'that exposes the violence of the state') cannot be divorced from the physical and embodied acts required to actually comprehend the work (e.g. our strained neck muscles as we peer around a sculpture, our dilating pupils as we peer into a painting). Brisley's work has done so much to foreground the placement and movement of bodies in the world, and for many artists this would be enough. But Brisley envisions a much larger canvas by calling attention to the power structures working to strip our reasoning bodies of agency. These concerns are explicitly realized in works dominated by steel and wooden cages such as *1=66,666* (1983) and *Untitled* (1976-2014), and even more manifest in earlier pieces such as *Celebration for Institutional Consumption* (1970) and *Measurement and Division* (1977) where a human form – usually Brisley himself – is suspended within the structure. What makes Brisley's work so important is its ability to prize open – and keep open – a space of interrogation between the corporeal and the political, between the body's capacity to empower itself as it joins with others, and power's capacity to arrange those bodies into hierarchies that privilege the few.

Given his explicit concerns with structures of power, Brisley is often understood to be a 'political' artist. Indeed, much of his work critically intervenes in the continual production and management of our foundational values; for example, the relentless accumulation of capital is exposed in the abandoned shop fronts of *Next Door (the missing subject)* (2010), the entrenched class system is revealed in the everyday negotiations between factory workers and management in *Hille Fellowship* (1970), the privilege of the monarchy is mocked in *Seeing Red* (1995), and our increasingly mediated culture is skewered in *Bath Works* (1974). Within the parameters of 'political' art defined in this way, Brisley's engagement with Northern Ireland is of particular interest not only because it spans much of his career, but also because it is expressed in all the different media he pursues.

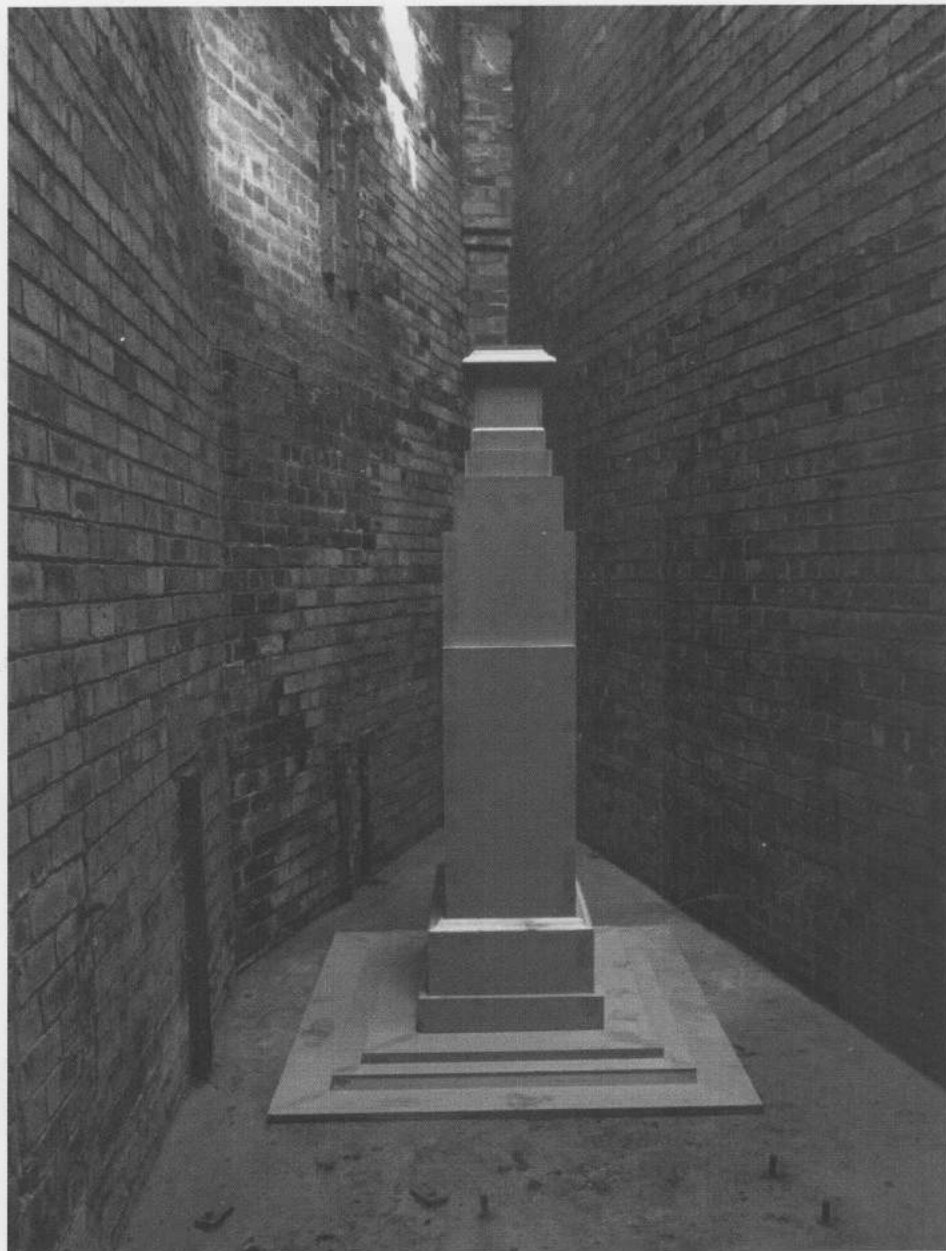


Image: Stuart Brisley & Maya Balcioglu, *Cenotaph Project* 1987-1991, MDF and acrylic paint
Photograph courtesy the artists

His 1972 performance piece *You know it makes sense (with reference to allegations made against the British Army in Ulster concerning torture)* is unbelievably prescient in its examination of the torture techniques used in Northern Ireland that have recently re-emerged in UK and US counter-terrorism practices. The Troubles get a quieter treatment in the muted *Dirty Protest, Armagh* (1993-96) depicting Mairead Farrell in her cell, but it is the two images of *YDOOLBBLOODYSUNDAYYADNUS* (1999) that demonstrate Brisley's capacity to comprehensively unsettle dominant forms of power. His textual inversions, repetitions and inventions, along with the multiple gradations of the colour grey, remind us that the events of Bloody Sunday refuse to remain in the past and instead linger in different forms, constantly disrupting any reach for consensus. Certainly his work on Northern Ireland reminds us that violence – especially that which is perpetrated by state powers and inflected with colonial adventure – continues to puncture all claims to democratic life. More importantly, it suggests that peace and violence always co-exist – that despite the fervent wishes of local politicians and citizens, there is no post-conflict utopia in which a 'shared future' can eradicate tension, struggle and antagonism. In this sense, Brisley's engagement with Northern Ireland should be placed in conversation with his *Cenotaph Project* with Maya Balcioglu (1987-91) which questions dominant forms of First World War commemoration. What does it mean to repeat such an iconic memorial and change it every time? Is this a mark of reverence or disrespect?

While this framing of Brisley's work is quite seductive, I want to think a little more carefully about what it means to label him a 'political' artist in the manner I have outlined above. One of the risks of such a judgement is that it dismisses the subtlety, range and power of these 'political' artworks by restricting them to a commentary on their explicit subject matter – this is about Northern Ireland, or this is *about* the Royal Family. This is grossly unfair to the artworks themselves because it reduces them to one-note interventions – Agitprop art in the service of a single political message. There is so much more going on in this work that both exceeds and refuses such a framing. For example, even if we know nothing of the background of *Hille Fellowship* (1970) and Brisley's comprehensive engagement with industrial relations in a Suffolk furniture factory, our physical approach to the installation gives us an immediate sense of the work's central tension between the inclusivity of solidarity and the exclusivity of any group formation. Such is the stuff of great art: an ability to speak beyond itself and resonate within the everyday lives of diverse audiences. The questions prompted by the *Hille Fellowship* (1970) – Are the chairs comfortable? Is the steel cold? Can I get into the middle? Are the chairs welded together? Why aren't they stacked vertically? – go some way to connecting audiences to the workers who made this furniture. This is solidarity of a different kind, and like the alternative memorialization offered by *The Cenotaph Project* (1987-1991), it resonates across decades and fosters unexpected connections.



Image: *Shadow*, 2012, Watercolour and gouache on paper
Photograph courtesy Andy Keate



Image: *Sink*, 2011, Watercolour on paper
Photograph courtesy Andy Keate



Image: *Nuclear Pool*, 2013, Iron oxide, spinel black and watercolour on paper
Photograph courtesy Andy Keate



Image: *Nuclear Terminus (Jerusalem)*, 2014, Watercolour and gouache on paper
Photograph courtesy Andy Keate

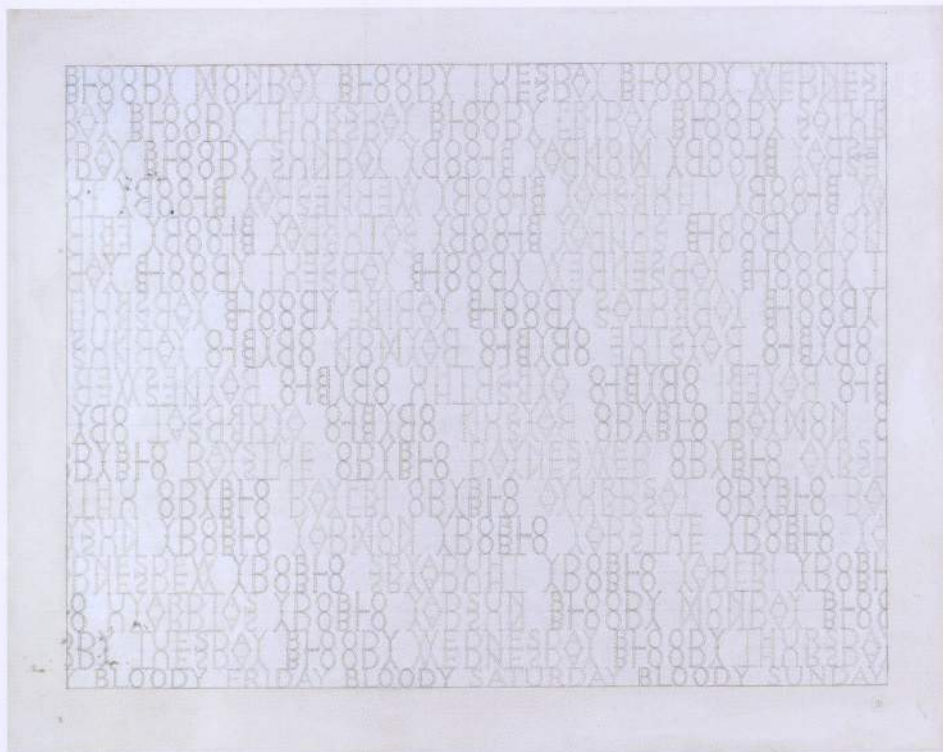


Labelling Brisley's work 'political' in a narrow sense also prevents us from seeing how power infiltrates, contaminates and constitutes supposedly non-political scenes. Take, for example, the recent paintings in the *Jerusalem* series (2010-11). What initially appear as classical and intricately constructed landscapes – some green, some dark, some water-logged – are, upon further inspection, nothing of the sort. Because we must peer closely at the paper and thus heft our bodies into proximity, these paintings demand our full and embodied entrance into the scene. What we find sequestered amidst these seemingly conventional scenes are unexpected moments of horror, decay, danger, contamination, dread, corruption and stagnation; these are gothic landscapes filled with industrial menace. And it is here, in the lurking, festering threat of violence that a more expansive understanding of the political emerges in Brisley's work. Because it is impossible to escape the networked tentacles of authority, no matter what guise they come in, our task is to collectively resist, subvert, and re-imagine power in as many ways as we can.

Rather surprisingly, given the darkness of the much of Brisley's subject matter and palette, I understand his work to be infused with a great deal of hope. While he often makes us see what we don't want to see (filth, shit, garbage), he also alters the parameters of our vision so we both see anew what we once took for granted, and take in new scales, vistas and textures.



Image: *12 Days*, 1975, Performance, Kunst Forum, Rottweil
Photograph courtesy Leslie Haslam



This is very far from 'one-note' politics: this is complicated, confrontational and challenging. Often it produces feelings of anxiety and discomfort, but this is the price of Brisley's hopeful politics and his commitment to sharing ideas about how to create alternative pathways out of the structures of power – the state, received notions of history, consumer capitalism, the nuclear family, dominant gender roles – that threaten to extinguish our agency and our capacity for meaningful solidarity. To properly honour Brisley's work, then, we have to think it and feel it at the same time and reflect on how that re-energised coupling can also be implemented in the world outside of gallery space. This, I think, is a much better account of Brisley's 'political' art: work that elevates the embodied nature of our aesthetic encounters and at the same time urges us to continually engage with entrenched questions of exclusion, marginality and violence.

Debbie Lisle is a Reader in International Relations in the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy, Queen's University Belfast.



Principal
Funder



The Henry Moore
Foundation