

Seeing Stasis

Interregnum's Stasis

The components of Stuart Brisley's *Next Door (the missing subject)*, a performance, installation, sculpture, painting, journals, sound, and film, are all organized around a (non)event: an interregnum. The kind of interregnum Brisley has in mind is less about regnal transitions (though the royalty does play a role), but periods of politico-historical impasse. Looming in the background is Antonio Gramsci's brief comment on the interregnum, written while imprisoned by the Italian Fascist regime in the late-1920s. The entry, like much of what is now known as the *Quaderni del Carcere (The Prison Notebooks)*, reflects on Italian politics following the First World War, specifically when it became apparent that existing ideologies were no longer historically valid, and yet no clear alternative presented itself to the working class and peasantry. During this period, Gramsci argues, the "historically normal solutions" are blocked, resulting in a political milieu in which ruling parties "dominate" through force rather than lead ideologically (Gramsci anticipates Louis Althusser's important distinction between Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses). The dominant regime's reliance on repressive tactics exacerbates the alienation the masses feel from their rulers and ruling ideologies: "physical depression will lead in the long run to a widespread scepticism, and a new 'arrangement' will be found."

But not-knowing is a form of knowing. "The death of old ideologies," Gramsci explains, "takes the form of scepticism with regard to all theories and general formulae; of application to the pure economic fact (earnings, etc.), and to a form of politics which is not simply realistic in fact (this is always the case) but which is cynical in its immediate manifestation" (276). The interregnum doesn't usher in a new regime, only widespread "cynicism" of existing ideologies and institutions. Gramsci describes a state of "scepticism" rather than revolutionary discord. Far from suspiciousness unique to an annoying few, the kind of cynicism ushered in by interregnum proliferates amongst the masses—it is a kind of common knowledge; everyone knows the political sphere is vapid, and that leaders lead through force. Importantly, the clarity afforded by the interregnum is retrospective towards older regimes, but not anticipatory towards the formation of new alternatives—the politics of cynicism is a politics of rejection, repudiation, renouncement. If the old regime's ideologies were hegemonic, in the interregnum it is the cynicism and skepticism towards these old ideologies that becomes hegemonic. In other words, what emerges in the interregnum is a knowledge about the limits and outdatedness of dominant (as opposed to "leading") ideologies—an anachronistic knowledge. What is known is known to be outdated; what is not known is from a future regime.

One way to understand this is in a classical, if now vulgar, definition of ideology. The saying goes, ideology is analogous to the unconscious. If this is the case, then the interregnum describes a coming-to-consciousness of ideology, for it is a period in which that which was unconscious (what we cannot know, ideology) is known full-well. But rather than a period of simple demystification, such a knowledge comes at the cost of losing one's historical sensibility—we don't know where we are headed. So the old regime's slogans, platforms, and ideas stick out as anachronistic proclamations (Gramsci calls them "mummified"), but the historical *telos* of society remains beyond one's grasp. We lose our time-sense when we gain knowledge of today's defunctness.

And yet, the condition of possibility for knowing something as anachronistic is that one *must be* in a time beyond the old; one must be in a new regime to know something as old. Ideas can only seem anachronistic when one experiences them in a new time, after they have been outlived by history. So in order to perceive a regime as outdated is to already inhabit a new time-sense, only one that doesn't conform to a familiar understanding of "regime."

Interregnum in Stasis

The idea of the interregnum has its roots in classical Rome. But modern political thought is equally a child of the Greek tradition, for which the closest equivalent to “interregnum” is “stasis.” The etymological root for “state,” “stasis” was translated by Hobbes as “sedition” and “civil war.” Why this conjuncture in the Greek tradition between state and stability on the one hand, and sedition and civil war on the other? Why did classical Greece see discord and stability in the same word? The late classicist and feminist Nicole Loraux explains that stasis in ancient Greek thought is “synonymous with kinesis, movement or, more specifically, agitation.” It is the name “of the being at rest and of the standing position in its motionlessness,” “between agitation and motionlessness.” As Loraux and others have argued, the entire notion of Greek politics is premised on a conjuncture between states of stability, immobility and peace on the one hand, and discord, movement, and unrest on the other. The contradiction inherent to stasis is that political tranquility and order cannot exist without the threat of agitation and unrest, and that conflict within the Greek city cannot take place without presupposing the democratic processes and institutions common to its inhabitants.

Stasis thus describes a balance where antagonistic forces are locked in perfect symmetry. As Loraux explains, “Thus Alcaeus's stasis of the winds, balanced forces holding up the motionless front of air that moves above the ship of state in distress” (106). The result is “movement at rest, a front that does not yield and introduces into the city the paradoxical unity that characterizes the simultaneous insurrection of two halves of a whole” (108). Constant opposition, it turns out, is the cornerstone of the polis. But this is also why the polis's stability is impossibly precarious. Hence, Loraux explains, “It is necessary to knot, bind, weave, and regulate civil peace each and every day because the threat of a tear always looms: the slightest loosening of the knot, the tiniest split in the fabric, and the rift dividing the city gapes open” (94). Rather than a period of regime-transition, stasis describes times of violent peace and tumultuous cohesion.

So while the interregnum describes a rupture between history and ideology, stasis describes the tumult that undergirds peace (and the chaos that is the precondition for tranquility). For Gramsci, the interregnum is that time during which ideologies are demystified, and turned into a knowledge of anachronisms. Such a moment of clarity, however, obscures one's own historical trajectory—history seems like a dead-end, but this impasse is actually our political unconscious. Stasis, however, is the condition of possibility for ideology. Without the threat of division, the idea of unity could neither exist nor function. And inversely, no division can exist without presupposing unity in the first place.

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Brisley's *Next Door (the missing subject)* brings these two traditions of crisis into play with each other. It consisted of a set of actions in an abandoned shop, at the center of which was the production of a structure out of old, discarded and abandoned materials (ladders, tables, wooden boards, a television etc.). Far from recycling these materials for use in some fashion, or their repurposing in a new form, the materials are used to make visible a *process*, a *dynamic*, and a *tension*.

The structure dramatizes the contradiction inherent to the idea of stasis by being, as Brisley puts it, “solid in part but also deceptively unstable.” The viewer's knowledge of precarity requires those walking on and around the structure (primarily Brisley) to be attuned to the structure's small movements, minute slippages, as well as his own movements in, on and around it (this is visible today in the film made of the installation). The act requires a sensibility for perceiving and living with “movement at rest.” One becomes acutely aware that each component of the structure is

interlocked with others, so much so that the movement of one can be the undoing of all. If stasis creates the condition of possibility of ideology in the *polis*, Brisley's structure requires that one, to modify Loraux's statement, "knot, bind, weave and regulate [the structure] every day because the threat of [collapse] always looms."

In the same act, the performance makes visible a practice of living in a fragile system, yet also the tireless vigilance that goes into enforcing its cohesion. Only what is revealed is less the agency of individual or group actants, but the dynamic inherent to the system/structure itself. It's not about rioters destroying institutions, nor about the force of law, but about the attraction/repulsion between these two poles. What do we learn from this microcosm? The performance reveals to us our expertise at maintaining the structure, which itself requires a roguish knowledge of its weakness, fissures, and gaps; we gain an attunement to the structure's "movement at rest," that tumult is ever-present, and the condition of possibility for the structure's cohesion. We become experts at thinking and inhabiting this contradiction.

The three paintings of the installation, *The Missing Text, Interregnum 1, 2 and 3* capture this sense of kinetic repose. Each creates a sense of impossible movement because of the impossibility of the structure itself. The last of these paintings, *The Missing Text, Interregnum 3 (6 May-12 May 2010)*, based on photographs of "Next Door (the missing subject)," that brings these two traditions of crisis together, but also introduces (and obscures) a third category: the citizen-subject who stands between art and history, microcosm and cosmos.



In the center of the painting is the heap of detritus Brisley created, adjusted, and recreated over the course of ten days in a shop space next to PEER, a gallery in East London. The painting captures a glimpse, an episode of the microcosmic drama that unfolded over the course of ten days—an episode within an interregnum, which is to say an episode without end, *telos*, or a next episode.

Interregnum 3 employs a framing device that, like all framing devices, troubles the distinction between inside and outside. The set of actions constituting *Next Door (the missing subject)* are said to be a microcosm for the political milieu of Britain (and arguably the world as such) in the aftermath of the financial crisis. The painting of the installation is internally framed by a silhouette of the viewer (who is presumably looking in to PEER through a window from the sidewalk) in the center, within which Brisley's installation inside of an abandoned shop is most vivid. Furniture, sheets of paper, boards agglomerate in a seemingly impossible form. The heap, and the precarious way in which its components are balanced and interlocked, creates a sense of kinesis—these are not objects in static repose but in tumultuous motion. This is what the silhouette of the viewer makes visible. But it also directs the viewer's gaze to the right of the painting, which is a reflection of the world behind: a sidewalk, a car parked on Hoxton Street, and the glare of the sun. In one mode, inside of the silhouette, one can thus see the structure's fragility and its movement at rest. In the other mode, outside of the silhouette, one sees the familiar world outside, seemingly devoid of the crisis.

The viewer is therefore essential to making the heap visible—there could be no performance of stasis without his/her silhouette. In doing so, the viewer's silhouette allows the painting to perform stasis, which is to say that the painting is not a representation as much as the performance itself. Because the frame is a silhouette, it means the person mediating between performance and history is necessarily anonymous, for anyone can fill that space. However, for the double-vision to work, that face, that person, that subject must be effaced, existing only in form with no content. In place of a face is the structure's stasis, movement at rest, the tumult in peace.