Interview with Stuart Brisley, it is Monday 19th December 2016

I wondered if we could start with And for today... nothing,1972. When I was thinking about this work, I was thinking very much about seventeenth century painting and memento mori; the idea of how one can enact a memento mori or do that as an artist in a contemporary moment.

I suppose it had a more contemporary aspect for me in the sense of being active both as an artist but also making direct action from the middle 60s through to 68, being involved in the Hornsey Sit-In and the more political aspects of what was happening at the time leading to a kind of dissolution, a closing down of possibilities, social and political possibilities.

Could you say a little bit more about that political context...

The context would have been thinking about being an artist in that moment, so it was political within a broader desire and drive for change which we experienced in many other places like the Paris events.

Peter Sedgley and I looked for ways of how we could open up collective possibilities for more artists to associate and to work and on that basis two practical propositions arose, one of which was to do with studio space and the other was to do with a system that would involve promoting the work of artists as a collective, called Arts Information Registry. We had a broad support base from prominent as well as lesser known artists.

Space was formed, and is still going, to fulfil one of the objectives. I left Space early on, within weeks. I didn't agree with what was being formulated through engagement with buildings. Over the years, how capital moves and changes, how political events impact society have shown the intimate links between capital, markets, property and how culture, and naturally as the agents of production, artists, become part of these machinations. Today, we can see how the cultural industry is unequivocally intertwined with property portfolios.

So that's one aspect of it. Being part of wanting to change society and wanting to be part of that, wanting not necessarily through the work but also through how one behaved and interacted in relation to potential change, this, I was particularly engaged in.

So having started, as it were, with Space and AIR (Arts Information Registry), I withdrew and eventually was part of the Hornsey Sit-In and then later was one of the people, a group of eight of us who spent about 18 months to two years trying to start the Artists Union. We were thinking of another way of organising and another way of supporting and protecting and maybe changing the way in which artists could work mutually in the broader society.

And what, in your view, was the significance of the Hornsey Sit-In?

That's very difficult to answer, I don't know what the answer to that is specifically but I could only maybe speak for myself and say that I had a long education in art schools; eleven years and different places from Guildford in Surrey to the Royal College of Art to the Academy in Munich to Florida State University. But the sit-in of some six or eight weeks was where I really did have an education and it was an exceptional event. A thousand students, nearly 300 members of staff, though not all because some members of staff wouldn't take part in it, as well as some students who didn't participate; but there was a large overwhelming majority of staff and students who formed the Hornsey College of Art Association and opened the school up to 24-hour education programmes – important day

to day things like taking over the canteen and students running the food, the quality of food rose almost immediately.

The atmosphere and the sense of place was one of a driving energy leading towards the demands to government for a change in the educational process. Hornsey of course was one of several, as you probably know, institutions like Essex University and Guildford which was badly treated after the sit-in. Hornsey was very much like a live event in itself which was energising. Buckminster Fuller gave a week long lecture, he could take forever and people came from all over the place internationally to be part of the Hornsey events. It came to an end because the term came to an end. The students didn't have the means of sustaining it and most of us were part-time, so it floundered at the end of the term because the term structure was historically linked to an older agrarian tradition of students returning home to work on the farms, hence the longer summer holidays meant that Hornsey was closed for the long summer holiday.

So it came to an end. The following November the local authority had made certain interventions like isolating electricity and gas and so forth, and having essential supplies outside the buildings so they could control them in the event of something like that happening again. A whole set of negative protection mechanisms were established in this period and the college was re-opened again in November.

What impact did this have on your work, your practice as an artist?

I was already making, doing things in public so it wasn't as though – as I said, it was an intense, live educational experience but what I was doing as an artist was connected more directly to that experience than to what I'd been doing in the college previously which was

much more controlled and directed from above. Hornsey was urgent and fluid, staff and students were interchanging positions of authority, making collective decisions and acting through engagement.

So maybe that was the wrong question to ask, not how did you actually practice but rather it seems like the practice creates possibilities, things happening...

Yes, and not in a direct sense but I think, you could say that there was a coming together, not just for me but of course lots of other people, a recognition that the collective process was put to use for common benefit.

And your practice as an artist and the interest you had couldn't be helped, the structures that existed for educating artists were inadequate.

Yes, that's right. And the interesting thing is that – I don't know whether you want to go further into this, in 1962 I think it was, there was a report made by William Coldstream and John Summerson, the Coldstream-Summerson Report: The Structure of Art and Design, they were proposing critical changes to make the art and design institutions, the art schools, more amenable to other forms of bureaucracy in higher education as well as dividing educational registers of theory and practice, such as art history. Proposals meant both an overall enlargement as well as a segmentation of the entire field of education.

This was accepted in principle and one of the proposals which had a strong influence on what subsequently happened at Hornsey was the introduction of Visual Research, but nobody knew what it was and so it was rather fascinating.

There were eventually eight campuses at Hornsey College of Art – the art school was developing very quickly, it seemed, and therefore it had its internal dynamic. Part of the Coldstream-Summerson Report was to create circumstances for artists to earn money to be able to work as artists through the educational system, i.e. the idea of part-time teaching and so on.

This was a period where you have an evolving art school, a developing art school in terms of size with lots of people coming in part-time to teach, both in areas like art history, complementary studies and then all the departments dealing with what we could call related areas such as shoe design, jewellery, furniture design, as well as fine art sculpture painting, graphic design etc.

I arrived in this liquid environment in 1966 and was teaching in visual research and we were in a sense, inventing, introducing what this could be. Students from across the school from every department were required to do visual research as a basis for their education. So, all those students were coming together, in different ways, every week, a lateral communicative process was being formed.

What was the curriculum that you set for visual research if it was not prescribed?

It had a lot to do with a way of thinking about visualisation, so for example we were required to use a model so one of the things I did was to have two mirrors put on opposite sides and the model would roll slowly towards one mirror and back making it impossible; It's like a way of trying to come to terms with an impossible reality, how to deal with that in a visual sense.

The way in which the perception of space can be shifted and changed by the use of elements that are placed in it so that students think about a broader sense of what visual reality could be if we can call it visual reality; visual experience maybe through the use of

simple interventions.

We were having to think of ideas every week, so this is how we did it and we worked in teams, teams of people so there would be, maybe four people working – we would be all working together, we would decide “we’ll try this” and then there would be four of us working simultaneously in different rooms, different spaces.

The way you’re describing it, it sounds like they were provocations for thinking visually.

Yes, that’s right, something like that, that’s the way I saw it. I’m saying what I was concerned with, and then there were the students doing complementary studies and there were numbers of interesting people teaching there who were prominent in other fields. There was someone called Tom Nairn, who I think went to Australia after Hornsey – he was prominent in the sit-in and Jonathan Miller...

Theatre director...

Yes, numbers of people, there were people who energised the complementary studies and art history, you can imagine – plus the Communist Party was there in terms of student membership, so you think of numbers – as there would be, of course, given the number of people on the campus site.

It was very active. In contrast to that, a friend of mine said a week before the sit-in, “oh God, it’s so lethargic here, nothing is happening!” It was the lull before the storm! But it was a positive way to be in education at that time. It was exciting to be part of all of that. There was a general sense of optimism. Of course we have to think of what is happening in ’68 internationally. It was a moment of flux and opportunity.

Apparently the government did consider making Hornsey an experimental art school and were persuaded not to by a philosopher from University College, he was one of their advisors, very much opposed to what was going on and the government eventually decided that it should be suppressed.

So let’s return to this work – And for today... nothing, 1972...

Then we come to the fact that change it was not, and yet everything appears to go on the same but actually is not because the atmosphere of the disappointment of all of that begins to filter through. In the following February, for example, it was rumoured there were at least forty students in Friern Barnet Mental Hospital, so there were other tragedies, personal tragedies.

This shows both the intensity and the vulnerability of going into that situation and the choices students made to commit themselves to it which was real and intense. Simultaneously, it was a short sharp shock to the establishment, I suppose.

Then of course it changes. I was not part of Hornsey anymore.

When did you leave?

My teaching was cut down and I was moved to the furniture department. Dealing with ergonomics which was kind of interesting, then I left. Other people were completely wiped out and many people lost their jobs. Mine was so severely reduced it was rendered worthless in a meaningful sense.

What happened was that Coldstream was rather disappointed – he was the director at the

Slade – apparently there was no unrest in the Slade during this period and so he set up a new position called Student Advisor. It was Peter Sedgley, who said there is a position going at the Slade, I'm not interested but maybe you would be, so I applied for it. It was the only time in Slade's history where there was a large student presence at the interviews so I became the students' choice for the position and got it. I have the unique position of being the only person who was actually appointed to the faculty by the Slade students.

The staff choice was Frank Whitford, he was an art historian, interested in German art as far as I remember. Anyway, so we were the two candidates.

Student Advisor position involved weekly meetings with the students, discussions about the programme, visitors and other welfare issues which was then opened up to the broader student body. I was invited on as a staff member after two years.

By the time it comes to 1972, I had already made a work at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham which involved allegations in the Irish Times about the torture by British troops in Northern Ireland. I was interested very much in Northern Ireland because when we were starting to look into the question of how to form a union, I went, in Christmas 1970, to Belfast and then to Dublin. We wanted to make an artists' union of these islands which was already in the period of The Troubles of course. I was beginning to teach in Belfast so I had an Irish engagement and wanted more of a collective and political engagement between the artists in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the UK. It was ambitious and it didn't come to fruition. We finally formed the Artists' Union in 1972.

By the time we arrive at And for today...nothing, it meant that the political structure was not offering anything of any consequence in relation to how we might think of how a society could be. The concept of nothing is both a philosophical and a religious question, the idea of the absence.

Out of this work came the film Arbeit Macht Frei. Nothingness has a reference in Jewish religion and at the same time the parallel experience of what happened in the Second World War .

I went to a school in West Sussex which was a liberal school and we had – probably through the Kinder Transport, numbers of Jewish children who were part of the school body. We also had Jewish teachers, and some – this is clearly connected to Nazis and the exodus... when it came to 1945, the liberation of Belsen concentration camp which was liberated by the British and therefore, if you remember – possibly you won't remember, cinema was rather important for children. Saturday mornings was the time for going to the cinema and there would be news and there would then be children's films and so on.

So the cinema was a present event.

Did you see the liberation of Belsen on the Pathe News?

No, the school actually organised a viewing of the film, of the liberation of Belsen – we were told, this is an essential part of our education, this is what we must see, and it was.

We went to the local cinema, this is Midhurst in West Sussex, the whole school went to the cinema to see the evidence of what had happened with the Jewish population of Europe.

How old would you have been?

Ten or eleven.

That's why it's still with me, exactly why. That coloured the rest of my life in a way. I don't want to make that sound so dramatic but it's like things which recur and it's difficult.

But also you couldn't abstract it either because you had these children, as you were saying, with you at the school...

Yes, one of whom I read later, much later, Michaelis, I remember very well, Michaelis was a friend of Anne Franks' boyfriend, so close to events.

These things do stay with you when you're a child.

Don't they, exactly. There are numerous, I think, pathways that led me behaving like this or thinking like that...

Can we talk about nothingness before moving on, I'd like to talk about the film as well.

Well, what is it? At the moment, for example, I'm doing a work based on the Fibonacci series. It starts with zero. Zero is not visually possible, I think – very difficult – so what is zero? If you were going to make a representation of nothing, or zero, what is it? I've also just been reading Clarice Lispector as well as a biography of hers which also engages with the question of nothingness. She was Jewish and of course this goes directly back to Jewish religion again. I don't really quite know how to deal with it. I sense it more than know it.

And this work, And for today... nothing, given that it deals so viscerally and physically and materially with decay...

Subject of the work is a protest against the words Arbeit Macht Frei and what they represent.

Say a bit more about that?

The work is not an illustration of what happened. It's an objection to the actual terms Arbeit Macht Frei and what it meant for the Nazis. What is the idea running through Arbeit Macht Frei? It must be the genocide and the possibility of genocide and the act of being genocidal. That was my understanding of what I was trying to do at the time by using that title. The film opens with the act of vomiting because it's a physical rejection of the idea, the body reacts against the idea.

Returning to And for today...nothing, I wanted to remember the film first in order to comment on the performance which precedes it.

The performance was being in this one bathroom in a bath of black water with rotting offal in the wash hand basin which is to one side of the bath. On the edge of the bath was another area beyond which there was more offal, and the whole place was made dirty with the paint. The bathroom had very low light. The photograph that we're looking at is with some light because you couldn't really see what was going on.

The door was half open. Every day I lay in that bath for about two hours, I would have done it longer but it started with hot water and slowly it got cold and then it got really cold, and then I had to get out. There comes a point when your body doesn't want to be there anymore, and unlike people in the concentration camps, I could leave.

The idea was that me and my face just visible on the surface moved with every breath. The face rose up with every breath I took and went down with every breath I let out. We're talking about the sharp edge between life and death, between another medium and air, and the head being where it is, almost to the point where you're breathing water but not quite. It was fairly dark, when someone opened the door, there was an instant overwhelming smell of rotting flesh. The door was at an angle so you would see the bath against the other wall, when you looked down, you would see, or not, a head, or part of a head, and you would see this very, very gentle movement of the head bobbing up and down.

What happened was that there were people who didn't like it...

What happened, how did they respond?

They would leave quickly but then there were those who couldn't leave so it divided people.

Did they go into the room or did they just stand from the outside?

They would put their heads inside, they wouldn't come in particularly, maybe one step, they wouldn't go any further. So there it was and it's interesting because of how people review works... not this work but the film Arbeit Macht Frei which came from this performance.

Tell me about the film...

It starts with the long vomiting sequence and then you almost slide through the floor into the next sequence. If you imagine a glass surface over the whole and the water is running and so it starts with not much water but slowly it fills. It was a piece of Perspex which fitted just inside the bath, so at a certain time, the water would rise and there would be no more air; the expelling of air from the mouth and the mouth and the head up against the surface of the perspex, so it begins to distort. From vomiting through to the sequence of the head going in and out.

The sound is the sound of the actual event itself. There's a set of sequences of the head in the bath going up and down, and the head going from side to side. It gets visually more stark after that because we used sound film to use for actual film, which makes the image more graphic and fractured... eventually all that is left is a head with a mouth open which then goes under the water.

The film opens and ends with God Save the Queen played backwards as a recognition of the British invention of the first concentration camps that existed in the Boer War.

It's all shot in 16mm colour.

And have you shown the film?

It shows – we've shown it in Germany...

And how do you show it?

I show it as a film.

Do you do it as full screen?

Full screen, yes. What is so extraordinary is that nobody takes notice of the title...it's so absolutely fascinating.

So when they write about it, they don't reference the concentration camps...

It doesn't actually come into the – it's amazing.

How do they talk about the film?

They talk about it, a man vomits, and blah blah...

They describe what happens. Why do you think there's a reluctance to discuss the film's reference?

I don't know. Do you?

I think it's very difficult to face the implications of Belsen and concentration camps. I think it's very close in lots of ways. You've described how it became close to you at an early age, but I think it's the horror of what human beings are capable of in a close visceral way which is difficult. It's like Hannah Arendt, the idea that Eichmann could just be a regular guy, not a monster, not a devil, is more terrifying than if you accepted he was some kind of monster.

I hope that someday somebody will write about Arbeit Macht Frei in terms of what it is, that would be a good thing.

There's another work, Moments of Decision/Indecision which you performed in Warsaw.

Moments of Decision/Indecision 1975 came about in the context of a DAAD fellowship...

I think it was probably 1972 at the Edinburgh Festival, I read in The Observer a review of work by an artist named Jozef Szajna invited by Richard Demarco. When I went to Berlin, the first thing I did was to buy a Beetle and the second thing was to drive to Warsaw.

What drew you to Warsaw and to Poland?

As well as what we've described earlier, two miles from where I lived was the Free Polish Army so there was a connection there and then when I went to the Grammar School on the bus, sometimes a Polish General who occasionally I sat next to and he would talk to me. He said to me one day "when you grow up, you must go to Poland, it's such a beautiful country" and I doubt if I said anything but it certainly went in.

You bought this Beetle and drove to Warsaw...

I went straight to the Artists' Union and found out where Szajna was working. Szajna was the director of the Teatr Studio which comprised a theatre with a resident body of actors and then a gallery, a really interesting space. He invited me to come to Poland in 1975. I didn't realise at the time he had a number on his arm but later I saw that he did. Subsequently Andrew Mummery gave me a monograph of his work and I read the biography of him. I realised he spent four or five years in various concentration camps including Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He had been on death row three times, and so he was a living example of what I'd been engaged with for a long time.

Did you talk about this with him?

No, no.

So how did he come to invite you to be resident?

I showed him the work and he wanted me to come which was an amazing moment really.

What did you do?

The British Council paid for me to get to the Polish border, from the Polish border, everything was paid by the Polish authorities. Just keep that in mind. I'm always interested in not exactly the everyday but experiences that I can somehow work with.

1975, I'd already lived in Berlin for a year, I knew the Wall. I used to go there quite often, I'd go and would take things from it, rubbish, and try to think how to work with it. It's difficult living in another place suddenly; how do you work? The Wall became a live site.

On the other hand, for the DAAD, the Wall was unimportant. There was a sense of denial through avoidance. So, we're already in a conflict.

How did that manifest that they didn't want you to make work about it?

I had lunch with the Director of the DAAD Berlin program Karl Ruhrberg, I said I was interested in the Wall and he said "You don't want to be interested in that, nobody's interested in that, nobody." I did a work in Berlin over Christmas not eating for 10 days, that was done independently of the DAAD.

In Warsaw I decided I wanted to do something that is, not really possible to do which is to climb up the Wall. The Berlin Wall wasn't very high, it had interlinked concrete rotating cylinders on top of it so if someone tried to climb the cylinders would rotate. Death was written all the way along it.

I'm talking about going and being close up to it on the Western side. The other, Eastern side was different. There was a large gap between the Wall and where the city came to an end. This was the military zone known as the death strip and was mined with tank traps. It had tracks for Vopo guards to drive on. Being able to get up close and even to see through the cracks where the blocks hadn't quite fitted was a strange physical experience knowing that on the top was a brutalising killing machine, suspended in the air above one's head.

I went to Warsaw and decided that I would try to climb the Wall. The idea was that one climbed the Wall from either side, the Wall was fundamentally unnecessary in terms of human beings, and so I tried to climb the wall, and of course you can't climb the wall, and also I was naked – my head was shaven, I had no hair...

You were also covered in ...

Yes, black and white paint. This was a statement about the abstracted reality of this point of life and death with the Wall. The title of the work doesn't say that at all, it says Moments of Decision/Indecision which was a deflection. The British Council and the British Ambassador were invited to the opening, as they would be, because we're talking about official culture in Poland, not dissident. I'd been let into the official culture without knowing it where the status of everything is, high and politicised. Who were these British Council people who were officiating over the so-called culture, what was their background?

On the opening night, the Ambassador, Reddaway, and I heard his wife who was trained at the Slade, came to the opening and left pretty quickly.

The Ambassador to Poland?

Poland, yes that's right. Subsequently, I'm having breakfast with my friend Leslie in my hotel a few days later and a woman came up to me and said, "I must speak with you but we won't do it here, we'll go outside". We went outside and she didn't speak very good English and she said "they are sending letters of protest about you back to London" and she said "don't worry because we have it under our control and we are making our statement" and the statement was something like we invite people to come to our country to work and we give them the freedom to do so etc, dubious of course, given the reality.

Forward 25 years later to São Paulo Biennial, the same British Council people from Warsaw, there they were in São Paulo, and what did they do? They sent back letters of protest about me being there and how do I know? I had a Brazilian assistant employed by the British Council who told me what was going on.

Going back to the word, failure. You talk about the idea of an attempt, a speculation, and of futility and failure? I found this work very distressing and I think it's because of that idea of trying to do something and just failing...

Success can't be used as a measure in relation to it.

No, because whatever happens...

Whatever happens, it fails. So that's what it is, it's not that the work fails, it can't succeed in terms of what it implies, to climb the Wall. Hence the title is Moments of Decision/Indecision which is shifting it to another condition which was the fact that I went blind with the paint, I couldn't see what was going on and if you have shaven your head – that's something disturbing in the first place. Shave my head and then I can't see and then I'm in an almost foetal condition. One of the keys with these works, some of these works when it was tough going, I could always have somebody around I could look at, make eye contact with – not a member of the audience but there would be somebody I could make eye contact with…

So, Leslie Haslam, the photographer, became my eyes. I would ask him "where am I?" – not "am I here?", I know where I am, but where am I in relation to the wall and he would tell me. So then I would know how far am I from the wall. It is difficult to manoeuvre when you can't see in a large space.

Stuart, we started this conversation talking about visual research at Hornsey and what you did in terms of these provocations, these invitations to your students to think visually. The question that arises is how much these works are attempts to think visually about what it might have been like to be in Belsen or Auschwitz, not in a literal sense but in an emotional and psychological sense?

I've visited Belsen and Auschwitz-Birkenau, Terezin, Buchenwald and Majdanek. I don't need to go anymore. I've been to Auschwitz more than once, only because we were in the area. I was a year in Munich and didn't go to Dachau which is only 11 kilometres from Munich. I knew it was there of course.

I don't think the concentration camp as a subject is the sole source, in fact it's existential relative to what life is, what we are doing here, who we are. I am always engaged in going to an edge and also to the elongation of work, to long work. Based on the idea that subjecting myself to being tired, exhausted, where one changes psychologically so trying to find a connection with what is not human.

What is human and then what is not human is more the kind of question for me, how I go to that edge where I'm completely out of control, or not active any longer, where you can't go beyond the edge. It's like going to the sea and you can't swim and you're completely engaged by that.

Whether that is induced by experiences as a child of the war and then specific events, it's a difficult question to know quite why.

One of the most difficult things for children to get their heads around when they realise that death is something that's part of the human condition is the question of what happens afterwards, what nothingness means...

Exactly, this is exactly the point. Also, thinking back, when I was a boy during the war, I was required to go to church where I was a choir boy. Every so often there would be funerals. I was there at the burials of a few number of people between the ages of about 6

to 16. All of that enters in.

How do you think that's shaped your consciousness politically, that exploration of nothingness at the very edge of humanity, because in a sense it could go the other way, it could make you actually a-political, disinterested in politics?

I agree with you, it could do but I don't – because we're alive is the answer to that. If we're alive, then the political is something that matters and is a structural conditioner.

So is it something to do with the importance of meaning and meaningfulness, is that something in terms of the work you make and how you live your life?

Being alive is one of the essential contaminants that one has to try to cope with and beyond that, there is hope and various other desires. Politics can be positive, of course.

Hello Stuart Brisley, we're here today on a cold winter's afternoon, it's Wednesday 18th January 2017.

Stuart, let's pick up with Homage to the Commune, 1976.

This is a work that was done in relation to a large British Council survey exhibition called Arte Inglese Oggi – British Art Today, in Milan. I was placed in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II which is a landmark and a shopping mall with a four story double arcade. I worked under the central roof section of the arcade which had a mosaic floor.

I didn't want to work inside an exhibition doing performance, it's alienating, it breaks everything, it doesn't work for me – other people can do it, I can't.

My idea was to pay homage to the commune, to the word rather than an actual commune, the commune is Milan's city government but the word commune has broader meanings. So I wanted to pay tribute to the commune or to communes in general, but not a particular commune, certainly not specifically the commune of Milan.

What did you understand by the broader notion of "commune" that you were paying homage to?

A sense of collectivity, a lateral sense of structure, a progressive non-centralised position that the idea of a commune might have. I worked with another person who I worked with quite a lot, Leslie Haslam. He lived in Berlin. I worked with him because he had different kinds of skills to me, one of which was as a photographer but he also was very good with wood and making things. He spoke German very well and Spanish to a certain extent. He was a companion, a workmate, he really wasn't at all interested in being involved in performance as such but he really liked being part the process of work, however, it happened to be just him and me working together.

The performance was three days and nights, continuous, so it was at night as well. It was in February, I think, or January/February, it was very cold. The idea was that I would, that

together we would build a structure and when the end came it would be collectively lifted up as an homage to the idea of communality.

The arcades were huge with multiple levels, with shops and lots of people passing through. When I started, we had street barriers put round a space because otherwise you would get run over by people walking about. There must have been about 500 or up to a 1,000 people – I was terrified with the idea of starting.

You have to do it so I started by moving the wood about and we began to build the structure with its dimensions relative to the body.We were building an interpretation of a rose, a wooden rose, a red rose, a rose for the commune.

When you say it was in proportion to the body, you mean it physically didn't go beyond the size of your body?

No, it did but it was done within our capacity to be able to do it.

Two hours in, one begins to struggle to work and we needed a rest. Audience numbers had reduced by this time to about 50 or 80. When we stopped to rest somebody started to sing. It was quite startling, this voice singing. I went up to some people, they said that the man was a little "simple" and that he was retelling what we had been doing as a song. So how to stop it, or not to stop it or to leave it.
I got anxious about how to accommodate that kind of intervention, we decided we'd go back to work and as we began, he stopped.

When you started working?

Yes, he stopped, and we went on for a while, we stopped, he sang. This went on. He wasn't there at night but he was there during the day throughout.

So what was it – he was like a sort of chorus commenting...

Yes, he was...

Telling the audience what was going on. Did somebody interpret it for you then?

No, they didn't, they just said this is what he's doing. Periods of rest were short.

We went through the night and the next day, there he was again, slowly the wooden rose was rising. The audience numbers fluctuated. There was never nobody there, even at 3 o'clock in the morning, it was one of those 24 hour places, elegant and beautiful.

It came to the last day and by this time we had service; a waitress would come out of one of the cafes and say "would you like some coffee?".

By the last day I was feeling worn out but we kept going. The work had became tense. I needed an axe because I realised that though we'd completed the rose in good time but this stalk, it was like a tree, needed to be got rid of so that it would come down to the ground and people would be able to lift it up, or not.

Somebody got in contact with the fire brigade who turned up with an axe, I was pacing round it quite a lot...I axed the base down and were left with the flower, the rose.

We were left with just the rose and the rose was probably about that big, and went out like that. It didn't look like a rose very much, but it was something – it was a container actually.

This was our finale, the completion of the work. The barriers which were necessary were no longer needed. We opened up the barriers just a little bit and in came a man on a bicycle who was the singer who climbed into the rose! I can't say that he sang because I don't remember, but he climbed into the rose. We decided that that was all fine, that's what should have happened. And that was the end of it.

Talk to me a bit more about this unexpected intervention because when somebody intervenes in an unexpected way, it's quite disorientating…

The first time it happened, yes, it was. I was thinking this is powerful, he had a good voice, it was powerful – I couldn't understand a word but it had a strong aspect about it as well as an element of ritual. It added another dimension and he was being very sensitive about it. He only sang when we didn't work and when we worked, I don't know where he was. But every time we stopped, apart from the night, he was there, singing.

It was good, our intervals of having a rest, having a cup of tea or coffee were punctuated in a positive way rather than just being tired and needing a cup of tea. He worked with us.

It's almost like he occupied the work but according to the parameters you'd set.

It was neither here nor there whether people lifted up the rose – it was the sense and the possibility of being able to talk about the commune. It's having a collective sense, not exactly a purpose but a collective sense of something that brought people together and that was powerful as an event in itself. That kind of gathering, of people from all walks of life doesn't happen in a museum in the same way at all, it's impossible, in a gallery or any other pre-determined space setting because they don't feel a sense of shared ownership. Some of those people may have never been in a museum. You have to be open in these circumstances for interventions like that to happen. The commune is about the communards as sharers of life and work.

You said early on that you can't do performance in a gallery space...

I can, but it's very much more direct and very much about the nature of institutions or the characteristics institutions embody, so it tends to be more frontal, aggressive.

So, this was a live event in every sense, being where it was in a public arcade gave it an added dimension, the setting facilitated the action. My last encounter was with a man who came up to me and said "I've been watching you, I'm a furrier at the top of the arcade" - way, way up, maybe five storeys. He said "I've been watching what you've been doing". He then told me what I'd done. He said "when you started, you took everything out of your pockets and you showed everybody what you had and then you proceeded to work".

He had an acute eye and he had followed it all the way through and at the end of that, he said "and would you like to come to dinner tonight?" Very gracious, which we did, we went out to dinner with him by a canal in Milan.

It's that interaction between people to an event which they had no idea what was coming, which came and went.

Can you say something about the role of the audience in relation to your work and whether you have a design in relation to an intended or unintended audience?

I don't necessarily have an intention but the actual circumstances by their very nature suggest one thing or another, so there are times when, action and audience are completely separate and other times the audience is an active agent of the work. If we start with riots and mobs and crowds and audiences and then give an audience a class scale, when you go up the social strata, those people up there could be part of an audience but they are also in the position of having an audience under certain conditions. On the other hand there is an audience more or less anywhere, like people selling sausages in the market, they hold an audience.
The question of how one might work is dependant on how much time one might work, on the actual agreement for there to have been to make a work so once one understands the

nature of what the circumstances are, the given environment, then one's ideas can be brought to bear.

And is an audience necessary?

Not necessarily but if you do things without an audience in private and if there isn't another dimension for the work it can turn into a form of madness, I would have thought, or a form of insanity as opposed to sanity. For example, people make performances for the camera and the camera actually stands for future audiences. It is therefore an externalising factor either directly with an audience or indirectly through the use of camera. The idea of someone working completely alone and there being no reference other than that person's experience and statement about it – it becomes difficult to understand what the nature of it is, what the intentions were, I think.

In this instance, given the subject that you were exploring...

Yes, exactly. Audiences are – they come unexpectedly as well as hopefully. There will be someone coming in, they also can appear when one least expects them.

For example, I did something in Musée D'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris 1979 in Paris, entitled Une Nouvelle Oeuvre pour la Consommation Institutionel.

It's another icy cold wintry scene. I decided that I would make a work which started inside the museum and went out into the courtyard outside the museum. A wide avenue on one side and these enormous high columns with some steps down with the entrance to the museum.

I started the work at the opening by being naked. I had built this little object which was my house. I could just slide into it and I had a sleeping bag in there and I had my clothes. I went out into the freezing cold, put my clothes on and there I was, for the next three days and nights.

I can't remember exactly what happened, it might have been the first night or the second night, but assuming it was the first night, when it got dark – it was dark, dead of winter – so there I am and then these people started to appear and they came to the columns bringing cardboard boxes and all kinds of odds and ends with them. They were the homeless coming to set up their sleeping quarters for the night. My audience.

Then they saw me and I was interrogated to a certain extent to start off with, they were a little bit aggressive but we got over that and became friends, some of us became friends. They had clear practical ideas about how to do it, how you be homeless, how you survive, they said "what's that, that's useless!" We had discussions about my shelter and they showed me how it is done expertly, how you have one box which slides into another and you have your radio and you have everything sorted out so that you can look after yourself. But it's temporary of course, absolutely temporary. Next morning, when I woke up, they'd all gone quietly, there was no-one there. No rubbish, nothing.

There they were, the audience. In the daytime, people saw me doing things and took no notice of it because they were going to the museum. It sort of divided everything off in the real which was advantageous from the way I was feeling and thinking about life. The homeless were great, they were so – I'm sure they had fights amongst themselves but they were generous after the initial surprise because I was in their bedroom, uninvited. This was a hidden audience. We did have lots of conversations about everything or anything.

There was a catered world and then the other.
A new work for institutional consumption. And did you name it after what had happened or before?

It would have been before. But I didn't expect, I couldn't have known what was going to happen, it's not possible.

Is there a desire on your part to create the conditions where the unexpected can happen?

There could be a desire but it doesn't come with any expertise.

Any direction?

It's what happens which can be important. What doesn't change is the nature of the work. What I go to do, I do. These events happen and I either connect or don't.

These conversations have been about contextualising your work. But if I were coming to your work without knowing it or knowing you, , I wouldn't know anything about this photograph for example. Does that matter?

Yes, it does matter to me.

Why does it matter, that story?

I think the environmental context is very much part of the work, of the activity itself. It conjoins it which is difficult in the sense that you can't prepare for it because you don't know what's going to happen. It's only my memory that holds a narrative of what happened and that memory is probably slippery.

In some of these works that we've been talking about, these elements are contained. All of this then is based on a retrospective memory in order to complete what I would call a completed work, because the performance is never complete in my book, it's tidal and

fluctuates. It's an intervention. But not through the contractual agreement to do a work; there isn't a sense of intervention at that point because the factual reason for me to be there is not mine, I didn't intervene, I was actually given the opportunity to use those agreed spaces, put it that way.

So the question of, if I understand intervention – maybe is something which is an unknown, almost alien, which comes into being as it were, in a given situation or not.

Incompleteness – I'd like to talk more about that.

Performance is very difficult for me, there isn't a linear narrative, there isn't a causality, a narrative which leads me somewhere– and if one emerges I usually cut it off and say it's failed. So, we haven't talked about those yet, I don't think. One can make too much out of that as well, it becomes a mode of something, a style. I feel that performance is that which happens, it merely happens in time or we're always of course in the present so it's happening always in the present until it's not happening. So, it's happening and then not.

There isn't a narrative but there is an anticipation of what a length of time is – I'm going to do something in a few weeks' time for 72 hours. Time is stretchy and slippery, we simultaneously know different aspects of time criss crossing, it's a messy thing. So, I don't see performance in itself carrying a completion, only that one is in the present all the time.

You talked about a contract, I want to go back to this. The contract is between you and the curator of the institution, the contract is that during this period of time, Stuart Brisley, artist, will create a performative work of some kind and you contract around the time, the temporality, the moment of time, the resources you need...the place, the physical location, inside or outside or both or another place which has been defined and which you agree to...

Yes...

But that's not the work, that's the contract and setting up the conditions in which the work will be performed. And then other things happen so you perform this piece, you create your house, the doors, you go into it, you emerge from the building, you go into the space and you do that three times over three days and nights...
If the homeless people had never turned up, at the end of that three days, would the work have been complete?

The contract would have been completed but that doesn't necessarily mean that the work is a complete work. It's only in retrospect that once we can actually look at a photograph, and the photograph you can either see it in terms of documentation, there are other arguments about that as well, about whether one can give a work an afterlife in some way which makes it into another work altogether. So there are numbers of considerations.

Completion of the time frame doesn't necessarily make it a completed work. I'm talking about something that's more inherent to the nature of performance itself, the performance itself. You can see lots of performances which complete themselves in time and deliberately do so. I think that a completeness through text, through photographs offer another dimension, a viewing point with different audiences.

Yes, so the photograph, this conversation, are just a series of additional elements; they're almost like notes in the margin...

These elements, text, photography, video, do not only exist in the present. The action was in 1979, receding into the past. The photographs enable me to see the action anew. We can then recast it through a process of distanced clarity. This could be regarded as being complete. There is always a further dimension beyond performance because the action itself is at the vanishing point of art. The painting is the painting is the painting, is one way of looking at it, but the painting also has another problem in the sense that it's like a performance – your eye travels over it all the time, everything is in motion.

There's also the performance within a particular space and time where other things which are not part of the contract, which are not part of your artistic intentionality, which happen, which take place, encouraged maybe by the situation which you created or intersecting with a particular location and moment that you have established the performance, and these things can never be returned to, they can never be part of the documentation, they can only be part of this tertiary narrative.

I would give the secondary a primary nature. I would return to it anew. I would hope to use the material that comes in with the potentiality of it becoming an artwork. Or it can stay as archive material.

This secondary...

Yes, the secondary. Once it becomes an artwork, if it's declared as an artwork, declared and then experienced and people accept it as an artwork, then it is an artwork. An artwork may not have equal value everywhere or may not be universally understood in terms that I might have applied.

And how do you know it's accepted, who is the arbiter of acceptance?

There are different arbitrations by different groups, good, bad and indifferent. In other words, I wouldn't actually presume to be the arbiter, I wouldn't, no.

This is very important. You made reference to other works that deal with internal and exterior space that you wanted to talk about?

Yes, there is one. It's a work made in the main public park, Hyde Park, in Sydney Biennale in 1976.

So this is November 1976, Lying, Standing, Walking and Talking – Sydney.

My proposal was to go into this park and live there and at the same time be an artwork. An impossibility, a coming together of two things that won't fit. That's what it was about and I started off with bits of wood, a toothbrush, I seem to remember, and some toothpaste. That was it. I just started. I had all these bits of wood and I started to build a shelter to be private in, to have a sense of privacy in the middle of a roadway in the park – like Hyde Park in London.
In the course of that I encountered many people who came across and conversations began. Eventually the press got hold of it and just hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people, schools started coming and lining up and all kinds of things and conversations going on.

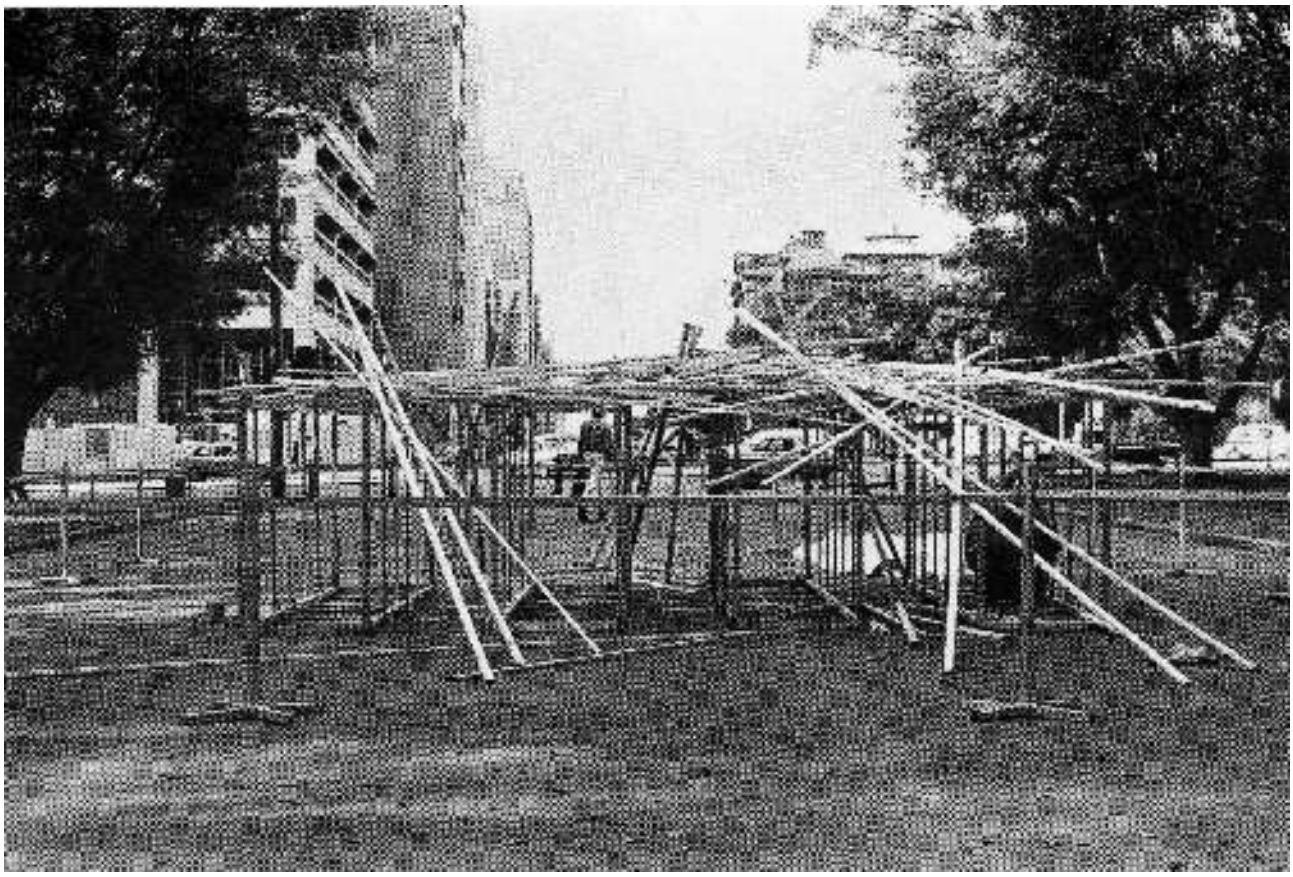
How do these conversations start, can you remember?

One of the first was a well dressed businessman walking across the park saying "what are

you doing?" in an abrupt manner. I said "I'm living here", explaining why I was there. "you've got the freedom to do it, I don't. Going off to work nine to five". That was the first interpretation and then, because it was springtime, still quite warm but it was springtime, the rain came down like a downpour, absolutely mad, and in the distance in the park, I could see this woman coming towards me. She arrived with a cup of tea which was mostly rainwater! We had a conversation and it turned out to be a young woman, maybe about eighteen, who said "I want to go to art school".

Trivial things and funny things, all sorts of things happened but the key issue was of individual freedom relative to time. This became the urgent question. In the end, my shelter expanded almost into different rooms, I got so much food, books, clothes, much advice and friendship.

The question was how to end it. Some few came back but generally there were different people. They were interested in what was going on, and there were quite a lot of them, I had to decide. The consensus was that I should turn the shelter into a prison so I could represent what their, the public's position was.



This was the consensus of all these people that were having conversations with you?

Yes, that you represent our position, not yours. That's what you should do. If you want to complete it, that's how you should complete it.

How interesting.

Yes, wasn't it...and so I did. I built this cage prison. Once I got in, everything changed, people started throwing things at me. It became aggressive.

So the minute it was transformed from an open structure...

So I got out of it, to tell you the truth.

And how long had you been there?

Two weeks or something like that, quite a long time. After the press started to build it all up, making a big deal out of it – interesting on one level but completely uninteresting on another.

That raises questions about audience and the role of the artist.
Questions that are surfacing for me are questions about your role being defined by this audience, this floating moving, changing audience, as being representational for a start...

Yes, quite. How does that come about?

When actually what you had set out to do was not representational.

Quite, but it became symbolic. It may have started when the first man said, “what are you doing here, you’re free and I'm not”.

And then your role as an artist is to represent me.
What was your reflection afterwards, after you left the park and left this work?

I realised that the aggression was probably quite predictable.

How can you say it’s predictable because you didn’t predict what was going to happen, did you? You didn’t predict you’d get that response.

I think it was predictable in retrospect. I was shocked at the time, but thinking about it, I could see that they were responding to their own circumstances. People are still doing nine to five, some of them. I gave up my freedom and willingly entered a cage I built upon their request. By doing so I became prey.

Can you say more about these structures and how that came to be a starting point for so many of these pieces that you start with; these building blocks that work towards the structure?

Part of my development as an artist was that I went through a period of being engaged in dematerialisation. Firstly I was involved in materialism, with matter and material which led to its antithesis of non-materiality. We’re talking about the sixties here, a lot of artists were doing the same sorts of things. My way of approaching de-materialisation was to make objects out of perspex with 92% transmission of light going through. This had the potentiality of a kind of breakdown.

Then I got involved in something called the XYZ Co-Ordinate. One vertical and two horizontals, three directions, four times makes up the edges of a cube. I was working with cubes and spheres, I could build them but then I ended up with all these edges which actually demonstrated the problems of the XYZ Co-Ordinate.

Then it got more difficult. I didn’t move towards Buckminster Fuller and Kenneth Snelson, about how shapes could be held tautly in space but not touch each other. Snelson found out how flexible and rigid components could be held together.

I was beginning to have these ideas which only really existed because of gravity. There wasn't a place without gravity, nor was there a place for me to continue this work. I arrived at an end. I'd been four or five years in the States, I'd come back to London and in that two year period after my return, I worked on the question of dematerialisation.

I stopped and then had a messy period where I was working with light with another artist, Bill Culbert. We made collective works with light as well as using directions in space so you could switch lights and so on. I was simultaneously thinking, I was beginning to think about the only thing that I can do is to – one of the last works I made was a cube, a wooden frame, it had nylon threads that were tautly strung within. It went into an exhibition somewhere, I think it was at Camden Arts Centre, or it might have been in Hornsey College of Art grounds, it was one or the other. At the opening night, I cut a hole through the threads, broke it open in a sense – and that was one of the first performances...

What year was this?

1968.

Moving out of that structure where I cut all the threads, I started to make performances. The very first one that I would consciously call a performance was White Meal.

There were two people involved and one of them was me, and we had a white meal with three courses and I was smoking at the time and we couldn't see anything – we were blind. There was food some people were trying to steal it, others were trying to stop them. In the middle of all this by complete accident I lit my cigarette and set fire to the table.

When I started making performances, it was about what we have to deal with in real life, sleeping and eating and shelter and all of that sort of thing. So that's how I got into making actions and primitive structures.

You've described the connections and you've drawn a line, a very compelling line of how that has come into these structures formally and physically in terms of materials and space. But conceptually, do you feel that there's a continuum?

There is a continuum. The question then is why can't I do the same thing all the time, why not, or why do I have to do the same thing all the time, why can't I always do something different. These are the same debates from different points, the same thing.
I suppose I had a sense like a lot of people at that time of wanting to be a part of an avant garde. So all of these things come in to play in relation to how one might choose to work or not. Later on there is a realisation that actually the avant garde, if you look at it carefully was/is probably quite reactionary anyway and also one can use any medium, any concept to work with. That's where I'm in at the moment where I feel I can work with anything. In one sense the overwhelming force of consumerism means that everything is commodified. It is no longer a question of a more progressive option in a medium. That being, even an artist is commodified.

One can't fight but one can resist. But there is no resistance as opposed to fight, there is no possible answer to any of this at the moment. So I feel I can pretty much use what I want to use, do what I want to. I use quite a lot of traditional mediums and others. Performance is a tradition with a long history, probably goes back much longer than we can imagine. All behaviour is performance.

Talking about resisting, there's a resistance to narrative. A question which it seems to me comes out of these works we've been talking about ,and relates back to the works you were talking about before, is quite a fundamental existential question about what it is to be a human being. The stories that you're adding as layers to the memory of the performance and the actions, is another question which is: what is it to be a human being in relation to others.

That's right, yes, I agree with that.

And that's why those stories are important,it goes beyond an artist's relationship with his audience. What struck me about the story about the man who intervened and may have had learning difficulties, was that he understood the structure that you'd established and it was almost like a dance; he was singing in the silences, in the stoppages, which he had understood and then responded to. It was a collaboration of sorts, a response interaction with a complete stranger.

Yes, we never did meet.

It's very powerful.

*Especially now there is such a focus on audiences and engaging audiences and so on, in museums and it's very difficult since no one actually defines what engagement means. Again, it's another kind of contract, what is this interaction supposed to look like?
What is anyone supposed to get out of it, the artist or the audience?*

Are there any other works, external works, that you want to talk about in relation to audiences?

12 Days, 1975 in Rottweil is relevant. Rottweil is a small town in the Black Forest. This was a 12 day work. If you can imagine this is a space with an upper gallery surrounding the space below. The performance took place on the ground level, Leslie Haslam, the photographer was situated on the upper gallery. You can see the line going through the middle which gave me a sense of measurement. Like a crutch.

Is that a cage?

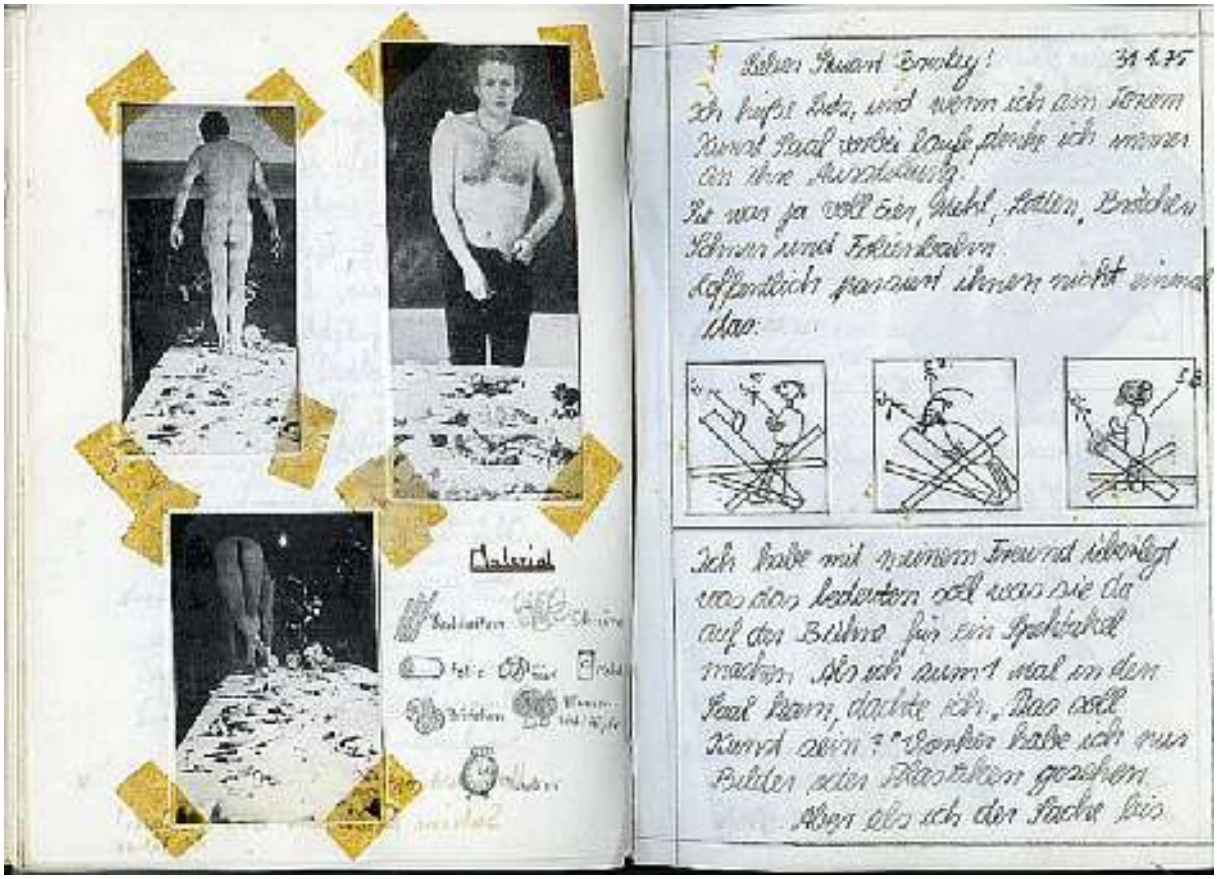
It will be, or it was going to be. So I started to make it just with the proportions of my body.

The first day, the first piece of wood. In the mornings, we built the structure privately. In the afternoons, it was open to the public and people would come in. They would be up in the gallery and they would look down and see what was going on, just like the photographer was up in the gallery shooting this.

The end of the work was breaking out. We had to break the structure for me to release myself. It was very difficult to do because it was such a strong object, just thin bits of wood but it was very powerful and I had a lot of trouble trying to get out of it. But I did and we left. About six months later, two books appeared and they were filled with letters from school children with drawings and letters in German, in English, in half German, half English, and they were all about that work and their response to it. I can't read German very well so I haven't read them all by any means, but a few I have.

Do you still have them?

Yes, they're currently on show in a gallery in Graz. Of course this was schoolwork, they'd been required to do this, I guess, but it was so... moving.
When I was recently invited to have this work in Graz which was – about performance and the audience, the same question, we suggested this work. As an afterthought Maya said we have two books which were sent through with the photographs. The letters became the central element of the show placed in vitrines. The letters took a central role in the question of audience and participation as a possible approach towards an answer.
Thirty of the letters have been chosen to be read in their own right, digitally copied as facsimiles.



Have you translated those thirty letters?

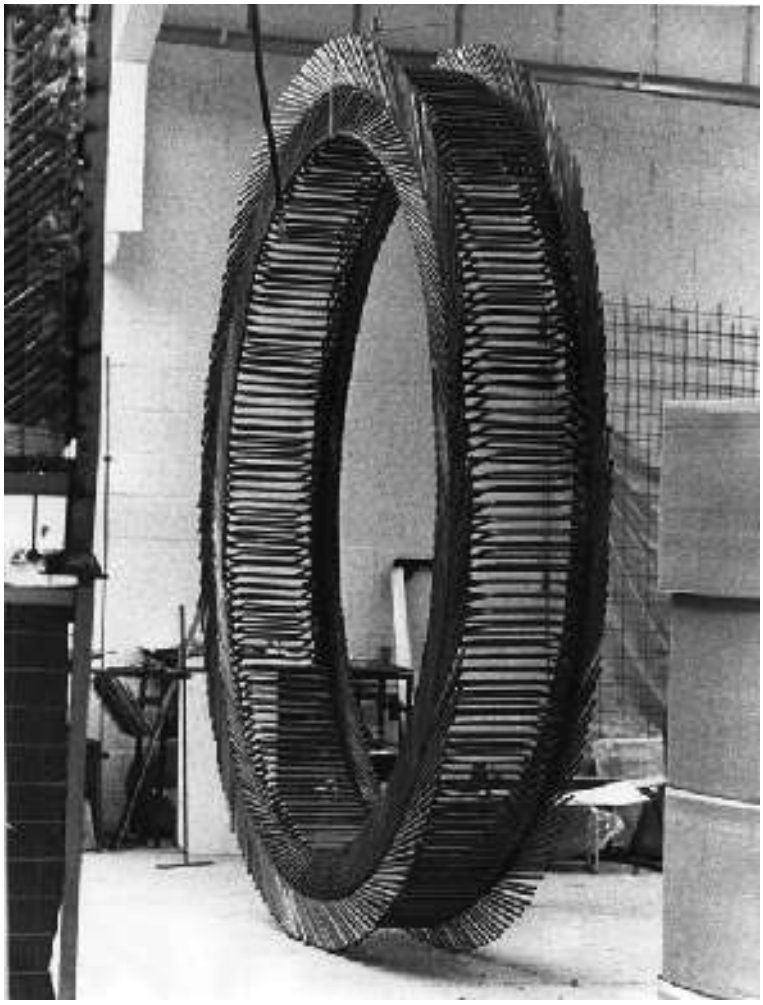
No, I haven't. Some of them are really good apparently. Some are critically attacking critics who attack the work! Some don't like the work. It's very good, I think, a very good response to a work and it was amazing because it is a small town and it had a strong social life, I suspect, and a powerful fasching fest in the spring, they have collections of masks which are worn. Used to be quite brutal in the past, people who had misdemeanoured would be beaten with sticks to behave. But that's all now gone, though it has that historical memory.

We had an email, just two days ago, from a woman in Haverhill, Suffolk, who has been working on a history of a work I did in Haverhill at Hille furniture company. I did a placement in Hille in 1970 with APG. She emailed to invite us to a gathering of Hille factory workers and that numbers of people have talked about what I did in the factory. She asked for photographs of the work to prepare a small invite. We're going there for the opening; it's a community exhibition they're having.

I think sometimes those sorts of interactions with artists and with works can be profound moments in life...

There was one man, I was friendly with him at Hille. He was bright and really good, he was the quality controller on the shop floor and he confessed to me one day, not long before I left, that he was having a problem because the company wanted to promote him into the management and he couldn't do it because, it's a class thing, he couldn't do it. His wife desperately wanted him to do it so he was split and what should he do. It's not possible to give advice, I couldn't anyway.
But these are people having their real life problems.

I did a wheel formed from the Robin Day stacking chair, stacking 212 chairs round, which made a natural circle. It was about the factory line, relentless work, Fordism. We built it and they put it outside the factory for some years.



Interesting thing about that is that when they stacked them, the chair legs locked in, so you just locked them all in and they made a circle, that was it. We've used this work recently but the chairs have been modified, they got rid of that glitch so now you can't make the circle stand up. It's better, from my perspective, it's better on the horizontal. It's an interesting... comment on the changing nature of labour.

It's not structured in that way again, contract is not there in that way, is it? The project was

not set up for that to happen specifically or primarily.

No, that's right, it comes up in another way altogether.

Interview with Stuart Brisley, Today is the 1st March 2017. Stuart, very good to see you again.

Last time I saw you, you were sat with your eyes closed in Raven Row in the midst of a 72-hour performance piece. Would you tell me about how that performance piece came into being and then perhaps we could talk about what happened during the performance?

I was approached by Raven Row along with numbers of other artists because they are interested in archives. They wanted to make an exhibition on Gallery House in London in 1972, possibly a 16 month period temporarily located in a house in Exhibition Road adjacent to the Goethe-Institute who had bought the house to connect it to their existing building next door. Before the building works started Sigi Krauss who had a framing business and gallery in Neal Street in Covent Garden was appointed the director of Gallery House. I knew Sigi pretty well and had one or two exhibitions in Neal Street. It was quite logical for Sigi to be appointed to run a temporary experimental space. He was an open-minded person and coming from Germany to London after WW2, it was probably a release to leave what had been a tragedy.

Gallery House opened with Three Life Situations, an exhibition of three people, Gustav Metzger, Mark Chaimowicz and myself. I was on the ground floor, the first floor was Mark and on the next floor, top floor was Gustav Metzger.

In the same year, 1972, Rosetta Brooks and Sigi devised an exhibition in two parts titled A Survey of the Avant-Garde in Britain. The exhibition at Raven Row is based on that exhibition, and is ongoing as we speak. They conceived a nebulous structure; the exhibition changes, performances, films, events, discussions, so it's never together, it's a series of changing situations sometimes overlapping, sometimes not. A way of thinking about how to put something like that together, not to concretise it in a particular way. They would have much more to say about that than I, Alex Sainsbury and Anthony Dudek.

Maya and I had conversations with Alex and Anthony. On the basis of that, we both separately had different parts to play and Maya devised the archival work upstairs on the first floor and I did a performance which was echoing what had actually happened in Gallery House. The first work I did in Gallery House's inaugural show Three Life Situations was ZL656395C.

The space where I worked had been leased to the Mormons, there was a temporary wall with a post box at eye level inserted into it. I have often applied restriction strategies into performances, so decided to have an element of temporality and viewing restriction in the Raven Row performance, titled Writing On the Wall Is.

I decided on an adaption of the structure of ZL656395C from 45 years ago. I tried to use some of the form that I'd used back then and it actually induced the same kinds of conditions, hallucinations. By sitting and doing nothing, things are internalised. It may look

like nothing is going on, but a lot is happening inside you.

Like what?

It's not possible to know, unless one is in a state of enlightenment - it's a complicated and difficult thing to describe. I also had the impetus to do actions; I did sit in the chair without moving my hands, for example. I moved into Raven Row on the Thursday evening, slept the night...there were three holes and the door was half open.

Could you describe the structure?

A wall which makes a small room within a bigger space and the door to this space comes in off some stairs, so it's right up close to the stairs. The door to the small room where I am is half open but there's a rope which says "don't go in". There are three holes in the wall, child height, a small person and a tall person height. Viewing is restricted which implies a lack of comfort. It says that what I'm doing is awkward for me, and that this isn't something which is comfortably voyeuristic for you either because you're also in an awkward situation, because maybe you can see, maybe you can't. It's a way of expanding a sense of uncertainty, by having small holes and by opening half a door. Three people can look through three holes and then there's maybe two or three people, maybe four or five at the most, who can stretch to peer through the door which is on a stair. This is on the ground floor of Raven Row.

Also, the notion that people didn't come in large numbers unless they're invited to do something which, in this case, did happen, which we'll get to. It was taking into account that there may well be periods when nobody was there.

Did you want the audience to be similarly restricted and uncomfortable?

It's a different condition altogether. For me, I'm uncomfortable because I'm trying to do something which is doing nothing! I'm up against something there, like what to do and what not to do. In relation to how I'm feeling and how I'm seeing because there's no doubt about it that if you are working in relation to people, there is an interchange, some kind of resonance if it's working well. If not, the resonance is disruptive. One is aware of that, you can't not be. You can't ignore it even if you deliberately ignore it, it means you're taking account of it. There isn't a way out.

The sense of uncomfortableness is different for the receiver, I suspect, though it's not my position to assume how that would be; also the fact that an eye is really very strange to see from the other side, my side.

Additionally a camera filming the whole time which is taking all my habits into account, which is just dreadful, really.

One finds oneself doing things that are private and one hasn't actually been conscious of it and one suddenly realises being on camera.

Unlike the time when you first made the piece for Gallery House, now performing for an audience and making a spectacle of yourself in your own confined space has become a kind of industry. Young people address an invisible audience on You Tube, an audience which may or may not see them. Their intimate habits are revealed to this unseen, unknown audience, also over periods of time and to a camera. I wondered if you'd reflected on that?

No, I hadn't thought about that in what I do. I don't use an iPhone and all the rest of it is

something I have no engagement with.

The piece challenges the relationship between artist and audience because you're not doing anything. When I visited you, you seemed very distant actually not like someone I knew personally.

It probably wasn't someone you knew personally either.

It was quite alienating in that way. Because you're familiar but also somewhat removed.

If you're trying not to do anything, you have to breathe. Breathing becomes an event, the body is moving all the time, we're never static, even when we're asleep. The body is always moving, the chest goes up and down, breathing becomes a key participant which is right on that edge; you're dead if you don't breath anymore. It's on the edge of life.

When I did ZL656395C in 1972 I was painted grey and everything was about environmentally reducing the nature of the individual. It also had a sense of being old. The title of the work is my insurance number suggesting an implicit conditioning by the organised state through its institutions.

In this work, Writing On the Wall Is, I was already that ancient person, unlike the other earlier self in ZL656395C where I was referring to a future and imitating it by being grey in a wheelchair looking old, trying sleeping. Now, I am that old person. There's a connection between that one and this one but this one is much closer to death and therefore is not so much playing on that edge of not being here. And actually I wasn't here in certain respects because I started to hallucinate but we have to get through a hiatus first which occurred.

I slept for the first night, before the exhibition officially opened to the public the next morning at 8 o'clock or whenever it was. Next day I worked all that day – I'm completely exhausted. By about 10pm Maya said by sign that she was going back home. By that time I'd done about fifteen hours in public, trying not to do anything, exhausted. At some point Alex Sainsbury and Anthony Dudek said that there was going to be a night party, a social occasion but that it would be fine. There'll be people, a bit of sound.

At a certain point I realised I had to go to bed because I was thinking about the next day when I was going to have to work and I needed to sleep! This is where the 72 hour really comes into play, I was feeling knackered. I closed the door which left the three holes which was a mistake, I think, and so I went to bed. The lights were on all the time. The party began to feel like there were a thousand people there, there was a lot of noise, music, people talking, just the other side of the wall.

Then, the baiting of me started. It got to be abusive and it went on for maybe an hour. I was there with all this noise, baiting coming through the wall. The party goers threatening to come in and smash the door down. A female voice said "no, you can't do that". I remember this particularly. It was threatening, aggressive on the other side of the wall, it was very interesting. This particular social event had a different invited audience, there was music, it was a party. The people were socially different; the meeting point between the party and the art activity was not mutual, there was no meeting point. On the face of it there was an interface connecting the parts, but skewed. The party collided with art, the aggression came through. I've had this before, it's nothing unusual. But, it was telling because Raven Row has a reputation for being a place of refined thoughtfulness.

This went on and I eventually couldn't take it anymore, a mistake. I was anxious, thinking that I had to sleep to work in the morning. The irrationality of it. When you're on the other side of the wall from a massive party and want to get out because you've had enough of it,

it was like that. The baiting was nasty.

I looked at the three holes from the bed but I couldn't see eyes, I could only see bits of plastic. I sat up in bed, then I got up and I went out, we had a confrontation.

Who were these people?

I don't know, we're talking about 30 people, mostly young. They were saying "how do you know it's us?" and I said "I can identify voices, I couldn't see you but I could certainly identify your voice and this voice and so on". Somebody came forward as a spokesperson, I quickly realised what he was – manipulative with language, it was a game.

I got probably at the most two hours sleep, something like that, hardly any sleep at all. I was deeply disturbed by all this because if I'd actually sat it out passively absorbing it because I was in a work... How does one, given the circumstances, which were acute, how does one behave and that's what's telling about it for me, how I behaved in it.

You referred a couple of times to behaviours or responses that you had as mistakes, going to speak to the security...

I'd had this experience in Sydney which we talked about where, it was a question of how to finish a piece of work in public in a park.

There is a shift, the public decided then that I should represent them in being contained by employment whereas I was free to do what I wanted. I represented another way of thinking about it. When I agreed to do what they wanted, everything changed, physically aggressive, people throwing things and so on.

Being contained, I put myself into a box, not a psychological box, I was in a psychological box but also a physical box in Sydney and so there was no way out, I could be easily assaulted.

And the same thing happened here by closing the door which changed the nature of my negotiations.

Why do you think that closing the door changed the situation?

It's symbolic. The door is half open, there's a piece of rope which anybody can break, but it says don't do it, it has a part in the overall event. If you close the door, you then close almost like the air, the option somehow of how this is negotiated between the person inside and the person on the outside, I think.

Do you mean that when the door is open, with the rope just hanging across the doorway, there's an implicit contract and the audience has to think very consciously about crossing that boundary...

Yes...

And negotiate that...

That's right, yes, exactly.

Whereas when you shut the door, you're no longer invited to negotiate that or think about it...

That's what I mean by the air is gone, so then there are three holes, right, and that's all

there is. This didn't happen in Gallery House because there was – whoever came, they were coming because they were interested in what was going on. In this case, the party took place halfway through the performance. I wonder why they decided to do that, what made them think that was a reasonable thing to do?

It's a question for me because when I came on the Sunday, Maya told me what had happened, and I was interested in why a man, an artist, sleeping in the space should be so provocative, how that could be such a provocation.

My sense is that stillness and silence is very provocative at this particular moment.

It could be. You mentioned a particular moment, this moment, there's an awful lot of disinhibition. Maybe there's a connection, between a release from civilised or civilising behaviour. The gallery space implies a certain behavioural code. When it's opened up socially to a party, there's a sense of freedom about it, letting go.

Here's somebody sleeping in the room and it's set up in a certain way – why is it then so provocative?

It is interesting because the difference between what you were doing and the YouTube channels is that people are performing with an idea of what they're performing and people have an understanding of why, there's a level of understanding why something is happening.

That's right, yes.

But your action within that space is, - and particularly when that space then transforms from being a cultural space to being a social space - suddenly your activity is not understandable. There's no reference point for it.

Later, I fell asleep. Next day I had hallucinations which were extraordinary, really quite crazy. All that day I was standing above an Indian city that was laid out with roads. It was a relatively small town and there were Indian soldiers marching on a parade ground, there were cars moving, there were people... it would flicker away and then come back.

It kept going – if I started to looked down on the concrete floor, this is what I saw, when I looked down I had these small people between my feet. It has never happened before nor has it recurred.

And not only that, the objects which were behind the wall on my side started moving towards me. The concrete had tonal changes, ripples, and the whole lot would move forward, they were all exactly the same size as they had been over there, the objects didn't get bigger as they moved closer to me. They stayed exactly the same.

Then of course, what happened to the space? The space went down between my feet and the walls came in.

I think it's fascinating that as an artist, when you hallucinate, you're hallucinating about pictorial space... a single linear point perspective!

These two elements interplayed actively into the third day. I found myself putting my hand forward every so often just to see if I could, to see what would happen, and so it was gestures going towards where the...

So you were doing nothing but the space around you was incredibly animated.

Exactly. If it wasn't one thing, it was going to be something else, there isn't an off; I think that was also to do with the lack of sleep and the rest of the hiatus. Next day was a bad day, I was not in a state to do anything. I did too much already so I was quite... there was an effect of what happened on the first night, yes.

I didn't have a watch but much like somebody who's starving and says they're not going to eat, I was trying to find out what the time was all the time. An addiction. Mechanical time is an addiction, I think, we all live by mechanical time, it's very difficult to do without it unless you move into another sense of time where either you're unconscious of time or whatever – the nature of time is altered. All of these come up in a work like this.

And in relation to the Gallery House performance in 1972, apart from I suppose the hiatus, the interruption was different, the nature of the physical construction was different – if you were to do it again, what would you change or would you do it again?

I wouldn't do it again. I try not to repeat, I have done things once or twice again, but's it isn't a reenactment. Once of my own volition and other people wanted me to do something - but it doesn't work of course, you do something else. You do something else that relates to the time frame you are in.

It's never the same...

It's never, can never be the same, it's not possible. How can we go back and have this conversation again - it would be different.

The Palestinian poet and writer Mourid Barghouti has written about going home to his birthplace of Ramallah after having been in exile but realises that whilst he can re-visit the geographical place, he can't re-visit the time he left, so he can never really go home.

That's right, exactly.

So, if people can't be there, if people can't go back in time to that performance, does that diminish their ability to engage with your work as an artist?

No, not at all, because that's another condition altogether. We're here now looking back, they're references, I haven't changed back to be the person I was then, it's not possible. I am the person I am now. You don't have to be in exile – or maybe you are. I used to go back to where I grew up, for a long time and I haven't done it for a few years now because actually I never stayed there, I just would get there and go straight through it and go somewhere else because there was nothing there. You cannot be there as you were there once.

I want to explore with you as we have been doing in these conversations, the curatorial and museum problem that this presents, that your work presents, for a curator, for example, trying to present your work in the future. Is it a futile objective to attempt to present a Stuart Brisley retrospective, for example?

No, depending on what and how you show. There's no point in – I could make a work which refers back to any of the works that I've done but they can't possibly be the same. They can only have a resonance. The cells change in the body every seven years, so we're completely different cells, all the cells have been changed. Take that as a rather impure sort of analogy. What happens in the brain, what happens to the memory? We know that memory is extraordinarily elusive and is also party to fabrications of all sorts and lots of people, especially when they get old, they fabricate the past.

So, none of this is possible – not really. And so the question is what can you do with performance? You can do nothing with performance other than the fact that it happened. You can, on the other hand, use media and methodologies to collect and collate aspects of it and then arrive at something else which is not what it was. There might be an echo of what it was but really it has little to do with what was – it's sovereign, sitting by the side, over there, of something that happened and one has already lost the richness altogether.

So, the more we talk about something in the past, the more we fabricate it.

I guess that's the resistance, because on a very human level, we're always resisting the idea of something which is lost irretrievably. We're always trying to reconstruct it and remake it.

Yes. Did you read the little bit of paper, the quote by Clarice Lispector I put on the wall at Raven Row?

It's about making errors and the errors are in a sense more real than what one was trying to do. And that's got an awful lot to do with now as opposed to then, if you see what I mean.

Say a little bit more about that...

You could quote Clarice Lispector time and time again, she's said so many things but it just so happened that I saw this when I was thinking of what I might refer to and I like the idea that she was a writer but also that she is an outsider, both in the mainstream and not. There's a difficulty in her writing that people try to negotiate.

Do you know her work?

I don't.

Perhaps I could tell you a little bit about her. She was born in Ukraine in 1917, she was Jewish. There were pogroms in Ukraine. Towards the end of WW1 her mother was raped by Russian soldiers and she caught syphilis from the rape. The folklore - I guess amongst the Jewish population at the time -– was that if you had the baby it would cure the syphilis. Clarice was the baby that was going to save her mother which is a recurring theme in her writing.

The family emigrated to Brazil when she was a small child. She had difficulty in finding publishers throughout her life because her writing doesn't fit. It's outside the frame of how we would think of literature.

That particular quote comes from the last book she wrote *A Breath of Life and The Hour of the Star* in The Passion According to G.H. She died before she finished it at the age of 57. She invented another person and so the novel is actually about the differing relationships between Angela, the invented person, and Clarice, the novelist, the writer. What I really like is this whole question because in relation to performance, and this is why I used it, because in performance, for me, and I don't know about other people, you can say what you're going to do, you can think about it, you can prepare it, and then when you start, it's all disappeared because it's actually meaningless.

What's meaningless?

What you thought you were going to do becomes meaningless because you don't do it. The reality is something else. The actual moment is something else and so the idea of

Clarice, is that the errors that make for where the real work is, because the error is where we are now as opposed to what the intention was. So it's the breaking of a trajectory – and then you have to negotiate something else. What happens, for me, if it's working as it usually does, after a while, I have to have errors, to use her terms, I have to have errors in order for it to be real because what has happened is that what was real has now become a habit or a kind of repetition or something like that, and it may work once or twice but it will never work, a third, fourth, fifth time.

So, this notion of taking the error as where the key value lies, is an important one to think about, for me.

It's a very interesting one because it confounds intentionality but it's also embracing a certain kind of contingency as well. You're always putting yourself at the surface of what you don't know, what's unfamiliar, which feels for most people like a dangerous place to be.

Yes.

Which is maybe why so many of us hang on to intentions and plans.

Of course, in our different ways we all do. I'm pretty sure – when I'm talking about this, I'm talking about performance and that is not the same as being here and now, is it? This is something else altogether so actually that's always been the case that there is an extraordinary sense of freedom in performance. It's the freedom you have when you're a child and you become unconscious of time and then the teacher whacks you one because you're brought back to what you should be doing and that is where it's at. That's another one of those conditions.

Why is that important? Why is it important to create the situations in which that freedom happens?

Because it expresses itself and people connect to it for one reason or another, or maybe not for reasons, that it actually has an urgency and it's critical to life, I think.

How is it critical?

It's critical because we are so contradictory in the sense that we are habit forming and at the same time, there's always a desire for something other, the other is always present, within the sad frame of convention. The other is what people yearn for in some senses, but don't die for. What do you think?

I'm instinctively drawn to artists and to the spaces artists create and I don't understand entirely why I'm drawn to them. I was talking to the artist Elaine Mitchener this morning, she's a sound artist and performer who's just made a disturbing performance about slavery and we were talking about how race is performed almost like infotainment. The reason I think her piece has a sense of urgency and criticality is because it jars and creates a rupture where the rules are already known, where it's easy to forget, easy to not be implicated by history.

And so what I'm thinking in relation to the two conversations I've had today and what I understand from your performance is that it opens up a space in which you are not in control but also in which the audience cannot be passive either – the audience has to become implicated.

Yes. That's why private views are so useless, if you see what I mean.

Yes.

I want to know about what you're going to do next. Have you planned any other performances?

No, I don't plan, I don't plan them.

No intention whatsoever!

No, because they come up every now and again.

When you say they come up, does that mean the idea or the proposition?

The proposition comes up.

Or in others minds...

I have sometimes decided I wanted to do something and gone and actually arranged it and done it but that's rare and also I don't like doing performances too frequently either because they're not, this is not about practice makes perfect in any sense at all – it's quite the reverse. What I'm always having problems with is the similarity that occurs in retrospect when I look at them and think that at the time I thought they were so different but actually they're all the same.

Do you not like the similarity?

I don't like repeating things and also I like the idea of being able to do something, to be fresh. I think what's happening is, now that I'm getting old and there's not that much time left and not only that, the actual urgency of the moment is here in a completely different way than it was 30 years ago and that's really interesting and engaging for me.

And what are the implications of that for you as an artist?

Probably that things are going to be quite similar, because the daily possibilities for me are becoming more limited. In other words, the urgency is precisely because of that, there's a sort of narrowing down of possibilities. Not because of lack of ability or anything like that – not because of any kind of external factors, it's actually to do with the existential sense of where one is in time.

Mechanical time?!

Not necessarily mechanical time, I hope! But in mechanical time as well, yes.

Good afternoon Maya Balcioglu and Stuart Brisley. It is Thursday 8th June 2017, the day of the General Election and we don't know what's going to happen.

It seems an appropriate day to talk about a project called The Georgiana Collection and I wanted to start by asking you, Stuart, how this unique project came into being. It is a project which feels resonant in this current political moment.

I spent 18 months in Peterlee on a project that I had set up, The Peterlee Project which was about history as living memory. A notion of expanding the idea of what performance

could be was the core value. How, for example, it could exist in a given context like a new town, which Peterlee was, although, not exclusively just for a new town. When I came back to London, I found myself living in Georgiana Street in Camden. Royal College Street cuts Georgiana Street and the Regent Canal goes very close by.

There was a vast empty space so you couldn't see the end of it between there and Kings Cross railway station, it had been part of the sidings of the railway with all kinds of things there. There was a row of houses, probably Victorian, some of which were used for problem families. Out of the four corners, three had pubs. The building on the other corner closest to my house was a betting shop and I lived next to the betting shop. My house had been a hat factory, quite a small building. The hat factory overlooked a large piece of ground which was probably government property, it contained something like the Board of Fisheries. Inside the ground were weighing platforms made out of large components for trucks. Everything was in a state of disarray, buildings had been knocked down.

Georgiana Street, crossing from Royal College Street fizzled out into this wasteland. Next to where I lived on the other side was an electrical installation unit for the Electricity Board, and round the corner, York Way, was where St Simon's Community, a charity for the homeless was. A while after arriving in Georgiana Street I wondered what I might be doing. I tend to think in terms of projects quite a lot of the time; think of doing something and it becomes a project, gets bigger and bigger. I thought I would actually deal with a local community but then of course there's an immediate question: is there such a thing as a local community, what is a community?

I decided to define a community to simplify things and the community would be whoever I got to know. There are probably multiple communities but the one that I came into contact with were the homeless because they were in the street. I didn't know at the beginning that they lived round the corner except that they didn't live round the corner particularly, I think they were allowed to stay for three nights in St Simon's Community. The rest of the week, they were homeless in the neighbourhood which was a kind of base. There was always a sense of uncertainty.

The fact that the canal was very close to where my building was, very close, and I could, from the roof of my little house, look down and I could see the canal and see what was going on. I could also look out over the walls into the space across.

I noticed that in the summers, people would gather settees, chairs and beds which was the rubbish along the canal and from nearby to make temporary living spaces.

That's what started me thinking about how to make a collection. I decided that if I wanted to collect something I would use a camera of what I wanted to collect. Not necessarily people, but images and objects which referred to this sense of living as we normally have in our houses. We have shelter but this outdoor living broke that basic norm. It was indoor living spilled out on to the exterior, to the open ground.

Collecting through the camera reflected the fragile conditions the people who were living and surviving in. It also had a strong connection to Kings Cross which wasn't developed then; the general area was rundown, prostitution was common.

At the beginning you described Georgiana Street as a wasteland which is an evocative description. It closely relates to an idea of London at an earlier point in time, for example, the "ideal" picturesque wasteland, the post war period of London...a connection to what was modern. I know that you may not have thought of it in those terms at that time but I was just wondering listening to you now, describing the transitional nature of the place, one that is not settled but is an in between space..

I hope I didn't describe Georgiana Street as a waste ground.

You said wasteland, I made a note of it...

I really wasn't referring to a wasteland in that sense, but crossing the road, I was dealing with this in a literal sense that you cross the road and then there was a wasteland all the way to Kings Cross, it was huge. An abandoned, bombed in the war space. I was using the word "wasteland" in that literal sense.

Yes, but inevitably it isn't contained in that topographic description because once it becomes an object, it's something else.

It's interesting you use the word "topography" because that's what I was picking up on. When you started, you actually started describing the area in such detail that I could almost visualise it – topography not only of the place and space but of a moment, but also implicitly, a set of relations. You said that one could see if one chose to see. You were also describing the inside outside reversal, of private and public and it's breakdown.

I wonder if you could say a little bit about that because the very first thing you started to talk about was Peterlee and the idea of expanding the notion of performance located in a town, thinking about small towns. You were thinking about space and topography as a context or a backdrop or material? What's the relationship to topography, your thinking process and your working process?

It was a choice arrived at through the choice of the building that I lived in because I wouldn't have started anything if I hadn't come to that building and the people in the

betting shop, I think, they lived above it. So, there were only two buildings which were lived in, the rest were industrial ruins with one or two exceptions. Still industrial in the sense of the electricity company, or the national board...

The set of layerings, depending which direction one went in shifted and changed. The topography of it would be a general term to consider, the complexity of conditions that this place was in. By using the camera, I was able to isolate, select and understand, to a certain extent, what went on, but that was not the whole of it by any means because – how did I get into contact with those people?

One day I was walking, in between where I lived and going down to University College where I was working at the Slade, and there was a small park close by, it was about half past nine in the morning.There was a path cutting the park diagonally; in the middle was a figure lying on the ground. It turned out to be a woman. As I went up to her, she looked up and I picked her up. She was about the same height, quite big, same size as me. She grabbed onto me and said “where are we going, darling?”, I said, “which way would you like to go?”. She said, “that way” which was back to where I’d come from because she wanted to go to St Simon’s Community. She was probably drunk. We walked back to St Simon’s Community, knocked on the door. I was invited to have a cup of tea, which I turned down because I had to go to work, and that was the start of a relationship which lasted quite a long time.

She was the agent to meet others, others who were also homeless. That’s how the project gained a human sensibility. The way in which those people were and the fragility of their lives and the quick shifting moments from love to hate to violence to victimhood with which they behaved. The signs were all there too, bandages, people with bandaged arms, legs; because life was so on the edge that anything could happen to them.

This was where I was living. I didn’t want to study them, I’m not about studying, it was about having a relationship with them and then thinking with distance about what I was doing.

Was this also an expression of expanded performance...

Yes, of course it is.

What do you mean by that?

What do I mean by that expanded idea of performance?...When I first began doing performances in 1966 there were places one associated with... Middle Earth, for example, which was an open warehouse space in Covent Garden. I first started making performances with lots other people as a collective between the years 1966 and ‘69.

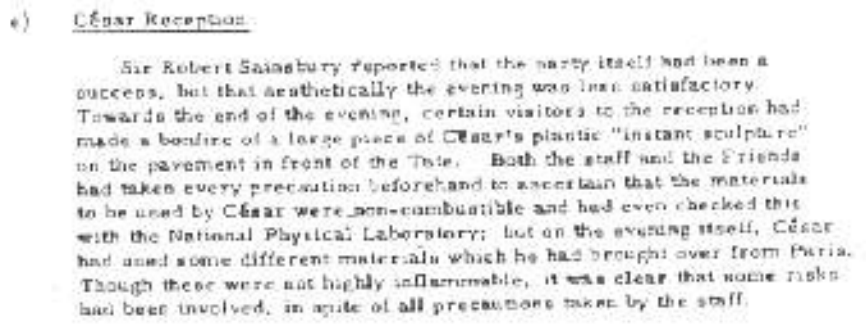
There was a collective purpose and engagement; at the same time, I was interested in direct actions some of which were provocative. Like the Tate event I did with Peter Sedgley, in March 1968, before the Paris uprisings. This kind of projection into another cultural body, in this case, uninvited to participate in a performance by Cesar Baldaccini at Tate involved something very simple – taking several polystyrene foam elements which expand 16 to 1 when mixed. I happened to know this and that it was instantly inflammable through experimenting with new materials at Hornsey College of Art.

Cesar was pouring this stuff out in red, yellow and blue. It just spread all across the floor in the large central hall, 800 people in evening dress had been invited to come. We got in by masquerading as BBC technicians with walkie talkies. As the polyurethane foam expanded and set Cesar started to sign little chunks of it and give it to people at which

point we intervened. We took some of this stuff which could be from here to the wall, large thick chunks, through the swing doors of the Tate, which of course we couldn't. One of the curators came up and made a speech about what was going to happen to us and so forth for doing this. I was on the back at the end of a piece, Sedgley was on the front, and he was saying “it won’t go through, it won’t go through”. Meanwhile the curator's speech was going on “you’re going to be banned for life” and all the rest of it, and Sedgley was saying “it won’t go through, it won’t go”. The curator, Ronald Alley, opened the side door, we took the foam out, went down the steps and impaled it on the iron railings. We then went back and proceeded to remove another piece – and other people did it as well. Some people were in evening dress doing this, we built an installation all the way round the railings by the main entrance. It got fractious. I saw someone I knew Marion Spencer, an art historian and I asked her if she would like to take part in a happening, she said she'd love to. Arm in arm we went down the stairs to where all this stuff was impaled on the railings – it was starting to rain. I was a smoker at the time, like everybody was, I had a box of matches, not because I had an intention to use them but I had a box of matches because I smoked. I invited Marion to strike a match which she did, and the whole thing went up in an extraordinary way. It was 30’ up, pink flames... you couldn’t go down the steps, the heat was intense. I remember standing with Peter Sedgley and we were about two steps away from the ex director of the Tate, John Rothenstein, and he’s standing watching it with other people, everybody’s watching it. Then in the distance you could hear the bells from the police car and the fire brigade. We thought it was time to leave, stepped over the hoses and left.

I’ll read something to you.

“Sir Robert Sainsbury reported that the party itself had been a success but that aesthetically the evening was less satisfactory. Towards the end of the evening, certain visitors to the reception had made a bonfire of a large price of Cesar’s plastic and instant sculpture on the pavement in front of the Tate. Both the staff and the friends had taken every precaution beforehand to ascertain that the materials to be used by Cesar were non-combustible and had even checked this with the National Physical Laboratory but on the evening itself, Cesar had used some different materials which he had brought over from Paris. Though these were not highly inflammable it is clear that some risks had been involved in spite of all the precautions taken by the staff.”



e) César Reception

Sir Robert Sainsbury reported that the party itself had been a success, but that aesthetically the evening was less satisfactory. Towards the end of the evening, certain visitors to the reception had made a bonfire of a large piece of César's plastic "instant sculpture" on the pavement in front of the Tate. Both the staff and the Friends had taken every precaution beforehand to ascertain that the materials to be used by César were non-combustible and had even checked this with the National Physical Laboratory; but on the evening itself, César had used some different materials which he had brought over from Paris. Though these were not highly inflammable, it was clear that some risks had been involved, in spite of all precautions taken by the staff.

Where did that come from?

That comes from the archives of the Tate.

It's on Tate website as the Unofficial Action at Tate.

It is now because they've recognised it as one of the first performances at Tate.

Did you give it a name?

No, I didn't give it a name.

On Maya's question... so performance as a projection into a cultural space, is that the expanded notion of performance?

I make a distinction between what you've just been talking about and what might be considered as expanded performance. What you've been talking about, uninvited entry into the cultural hierarchy, as an action has other possible meanings. My question was about the idea of expanding the performance itself.

The reason I brought it up was that it is an example of, if you like, direct action... and I was very much involved in doing things which could be called direct action. But, it also has the implication, it seems to me, of thinking about what performance could be. That was regarded by Tate as a criminal act otherwise the police wouldn't have been involved, I suspect. It has to be seen that way in their terms at that time. Now, some 50 years later it's seen as an intervention, it has a different characteristic.

It's quite reasonable for me to think that at that time in 1968 there was no particular interest whether it was art or not.

So you have a direct action which is an intervention, and at a later stage it can be regarded, as a form of performance which took place without...

Validation...

Yes, without validation etc, within a sacred space etc, and in that sense, I regard it as being a return; it's expanded in the sense of going outwards but its direction is the hierarchy.

How do you get inside an institution? What has happened in the last few decades and especially in the last decade and now, is that the institutions are so powerful, they are almost like independent autonomous city states. For example, what Tate is doing, in my view, is absorbing and acknowledging everything historically, as well as in the present, and by doing so neutering the past and the present. In 1968, you went there, did what you did and then the next day they had their meeting, wrote about it... and now, it's been regurgitated as a marker in Tate's history of performance.

The institution thinks it's invincible, it's powerful with the confidence to digest the event, acknowledge it on its own website, give it a title, write its own history and say that this is one of the first performances at the Tate. By doing so, the radical intent is pacified...

I understand what you're saying but at the time, we're talking about that time and the conditions at that time.

Yes, but it didn't end there.

Of course not, we know that there is a regular assimilation of materials which are, what's the word...

It's called revisionism...

Revisionism goes on all the time, but I'm talking about a particular point where this is actual, live, raw. In other words it was not held within a pre-determined framework, it was an intervention. It was an intervention and we didn't know what was going to happen at all, it was like a criminal act because its consequences were unknown, we had no idea what was going to happen. We didn't know what we were going to do.

I think there's a whole three days of conversation potentially emerging from this work and this conversation, but just to pick up on a couple of things: you raised the question of intentionality and Maya raised a question about revisionism and how the curatorial museum perspective rewrites history, rewrites radical art and radical interventions in a very different way for its own purposes, but you're also distinguishing that from the intentionality or lack of intentionality of the artist.That intentionality has to remain visible and prominent.

But I think there is something which we've skirted around which is whether any of us as curators can come along later and redefine what you've done in the terms that we wish. Can we determine irrespective of what you say, Stuart, whether this is a performance rather than a direct action?

We could also say that we can only do it from the exact moment where we are, the time we're in now as opposed to looking back. There's a certain amount of information, some of it hasn't been looked at. There are no photographs of it, there were three television companies there, as far as I remember, photographers and so on. The only publication about it that I know of was a magazine in Argentina which actually did talk about what happened. Jorge Glusberg who ran the Centre for Art & Communications in Buenos Aires wrote about it in Argentina.

So what about your work because the question is about your work, it's not about this work. The question is, is it OK for us to reinvent your work?

I'm suggesting that there's very little information so, as much as one might be able to have a discourse about it, there's a limited amount of material other than what I say, or Peter might say.

Let me try and come at it from a different angle, maybe, to bring us back. I'm sure we'll come back to this, that, you know, coming back to the Georgiana Collection, The Unofficial Action at Tate is an action specifically directed at a cultural institution but like The Georgiana Collection, it also takes place across boundaries. The action, it all happens at the boundaries of the doorway, getting out, and then getting on top of the gate which is the boundary, and the steps – all your description is again, in topographical terms about this boundary...

But also, Georgiana Collection, you choose the word "collection" to make a collection, so even when you're doing a performance that's an expanded performance or action, a cultural projection in a very different space and topography, you're using the word "collection" which is absolutely loaded in terms of the museum and the idea of what the collection is or could be. Could you talk a little bit about that? I know you select words very carefully, Stuart...

The Georgiana Collection came about after Peterlee. When I worked in Peterlee employed by the development corporation and made the project, it had a particular name, History Within Living Memory. When I left, I wanted to make an institution but I wanted to make a fictive institution. I didn't want to engage in all the messy doings of an everyday life without

a structure. I wanted it to be an imaginary one, a fictive institution. The idea of the collection was more to do with the fact that I was collecting sculptures through the use of a camera and that's how I thought about it.

Of course, the project evolved because it wasn't fixed in a pre-determined form, except the idea to have a fictive framework which needed a heading, a title. The heading I used was The Georgiana Collection because I was collecting through the camera.

But you were also collecting objects...

I was making objects every now and again, and then they were actually added to the collection, when I first made them, they weren't part of it. Do you see? I mean, it didn't have a set objectives from the outset, it was more open as to what it could be.

So, when you came to then exhibit, because there's a sense in here that the project had quite a clear output, that there were photographs but you were also collecting objects – there's reference here made to you collecting things from outside the street...We are looking at a photograph which is in The Third Eye Centre and Orchard Gallery Derry catalogue from 1986 and we're looking at a photograph which is titled "Leeching Out at the Intersection, ICA London 1981" and it's a photograph of lots of objects which you assembled...

This was part of my retrospective at the ICA in 1981. If we take the – this is a crossroads, so the intersection is here, I lived here, here is the Royal College Street that way going north and just down here, this is maybe 20 yards, this is maybe 25 yards like there – there's a wall here and a wall there... where there was a lot of rubbish in bags and things that people dumped on the side, they just dumped it there. What you're looking at in the photograph is material that I had picked up from this site of rubbish in bags not knowing what was inside it, so there was a particular process I used.

The show lasted a month, I had the ground floor space of the ICA so on the first night, I seem to remember, there were 30 tables, ordinary simple tables which had legs that folded up... and one bag of rubbish which was not opened – so this is the opening, nothing except that. On the next day, I opened the first bag to see what was inside it. One table was hung in the air, from the ceiling, so that meant that after 15 days, there'd been 15 bags of rubbish, 15 tables hanging up, and I had been putting all this rubbish on the tables and then they were being examined by me. I was trying to suggest that all this stuff was then re-touched, re-used, re-actually engaged with so the idea that it wasn't unusable, but there was no real intention to...

So you were opening the bags of rubbish, examining, curating...

Taking them out...

But then you were elevating each table every time...

One table a day...

After a certain stage, there are fewer tables than there is accumulating amounts of rubbish, so then it all had to go onto the floor or whatever, or there was a lot of clothing so it could be hung, and I had lines and things hanging – if you look at that photograph, you will see somewhere – this is me working on it, right? All different sorts of material. There are some things that you can't touch very easily, like pieces of shit and all the rest of it, that I found in it. Like here we are, there's things hanging, and some things are on the floor.

I saw a suitcase there, in the waste ground, for 18 months and it just slowly disintegrated and that was the first object I brought to the work and that was the very first thing. I think that's it there, possibly. Slowly, I was acquiring a whole range of materials and things and objects. I put two maps on the wall in the ICA. One was a map which included Westminster, the government buildings and the other one circled the area around where the waste ground was but not actually specifying the exact point because I didn't want people to go there and disturb it or whatever, not that they would, I was just being careful.

And so the idea was to bring to the centre of government, to the centre of where everything was, a show of how people were living.

That is the expanded performance.

That's right, you just described it!

The title is critical, Leeching Out at the Intersection – what does it say? It's describing not only the topography but also, almost leaving the past and moving into another space. 1981 is when people are beginning to talk about the post modern, Jameson writing about it in '79. You would have known about it but it would have been an unconscious tingling of some kind. You say in your interview, I think with John Roberts, you began to suspect the limits of performance, you became suspicious of the idea of making performances and wanted to look beyond the action of performance. Why would you have said that?

You said to me that you wanted to move away from your own expectations, of the audience and also the limitations of the form itself.

The form of performance?

The tyranny of being inside one's skin being, doing and trying to be and doing, and that actually has an inherent limitation.

What is that limitation?

It's the extent of one's body, the fact that performance is something which takes place in real time and there is no question about reconsideration of something. You do it and if you do it again, it's not the same, because nothing ever is. So it's always being caught in that time which is unlike, shall we say, making other artworks where the body isn't the centre of the activity. Like painting, you can reconsider, re-examine, there is time. With performance, you have to do it. There is no time to check, to reexamine.

Now, one may, do it again and do it again and in that doing it may begin to work in some way or other or not, but there's no way you can actually step back out of it. Look at it from a distance, give it a day or two... so you can't be inside and outside at the same time, it's one of those central dilemmas.

And yet, maybe this is coming back to your expanded notion of performance, in Georgiana Street, the body, how far you can walk, what you stumble across when you're walking, the evidence of human existence...

It's about time. If we talk about performance, I'm making assumptions because I'm thinking of a particular time in given circumstances where something takes place. In the Georgiana Collection, this was not the case; everything was opened out and there was no real sense of when it was or when it wasn't a performance. It had another aspect to it, it could have lasted for years, probably is still going on; it's a process.

You often say, "I do what I can do", and I think that in many ways one could argue that, for example, this conversation we are having is possibly the only enhanced notational archive that is possible of a work like the Georgiana Collection and particularly at the ICA because in fact to discuss the nature of the work is as important as what had been done there.

I think many of Stuart's works are liquid, Gilane used the term slippery. They are formless, which may be why there is always the possibility of the work not being located so not being found and why a conceptual framework is needed to frame it.

Let me do that. In the slipperiness, is a resistance to fixing it, to having a single narrative, a single trajectory which has a unique end point and I want to hypothesise a bit... I think this goes back to one of our earliest conversations. It's something that has been a revelation to me in our conversations which is your exploration of profound existential questions about the nature of human existence, the precariousness and vulnerability of life that comes through incredibly powerfully in the Georgiana Collection, and I wonder if you could talk about that?

Connection with the homeless was a really important part of it and I hadn't quite realised that until recently, really. One of the things that I have been thinking about is why do I enjoy talking to people or with people who are at the rock bottom of life somehow, or think they are? I find that there is a strong performative aspect to people's lives in that human dimension. I feel a certain humbleness before them because my life is easy.

I look at people like travellers and the route, the space I described before in Georgiana Street, looking out of the balcony and looking down into that space which eventually became filled with travellers' vans and different groups of travellers, people would be there for months, and then they'd move on. There would always be travellers there and the daily brutality of it all, but at the same time, there was an immense creative drive to how to survive, a creative drive allied to how you survive.

In Dungeness, for example, I find that we are meeting people who come from that kind of life, some from travelling families, grown out of it and settled but at the same time they are still operating in certain ways which express their extraordinary capacity to survive. Some outside the law, some in, not existing in a formal sense with the state but who are doing all kinds of things... it's just extraordinary what people are doing and how creative they are. I find that so interesting and I find it connects to performance.

How?

Because in the performance, you have no real choice, you have to do what you do and I know it's within a frame, a frame that allows it to happen, you can step out of it so then you're not in it but actually within it, there's a connection – they're not the same, they're actually somehow a reflection of each other, no, one is a reflection of the other. I think it's the performance which is, for me, a reflection of that other because that other is actually

day to day absolute real living – in the way that it's done.

I suppose I'm talking about travellers and people like that, fishermen and other people who...

I would describe Stuart's work as non-binary which is what you call slippery. It doesn't have a message as such, it's not on message, it's not an either / or binary proposal. Given that what we now have is entirely through the prism of the market which has a particular demand on what the diet and the appetite is. So, the nature of the non-binary works are not so easily categorised and because of that non-prescriptive nature of the work– there's a reflection of the fragility of life.

It's precarious...

In relation to the Georgiana Collection, in the Western liberal discourse, a Western artist often uses colloquial humanitarianism by way of looking at the human as a wayside victim. The victim is separated from the artist. This gaze is embedded in the Western discourse, human rights are linked to this notion of victimhood and that we can put things right (the colonial imperative) through championing "their" rights and saving the victim.

You couldn't locate that sentiment anywhere in Stuart's work, particularly in the Georgiana Collection, there's no sense of being different. It isn't a moral position, it's not pity, it's sameness. That's what makes the work political without being prescriptive.

Yes, absolutely, and I want to just conclude the conversation, perhaps take it in a slightly different direction. This notion of fragility and the existential is a powerful undercurrent, more precisely, it's not under, it's at the very core of the work.

I wanted to talk about Gainsborough. When you were talking at the beginning, I was thinking about landscape and the way you describe looking from the rooftop and surveying this particular landscape of industrial ruins. Gainsborough, was of course a very different artist but he was also surveying a landscape which was concerned with borders during a period of change and transition when common land was being enclosed...

Thinking about this in relation to the Georgiana Collection which was also about the relationship of people to a particular landscape during a period of social change; you were talking about indoor living extended to the exterior and the fragility of the conditions of people living in this industrial landscape.

In the Georgiana Collection there was an intended geographical arena. That sense of being in an arena within which things happened, was I think strongly expressed in the Georgiana Collection. I could see into three powerful directions from my house, there was a fourth direction which was more to do with people's back gardens which was not in my frame particularly.

So there were nodal points and the street, the part of the street was also a pathway through for people – mostly in penury, one sort of another by the look of it and also through their behaviour.

It was being there and also a little bit distant because I was in my little house. I even did a piece of work about looking out through the spyhole into the outside. The house became a camera in itself because it had a spyhole, you looked through it. So the transmission of people and behaviours, and let me tell you they covered everything, more or less everything that goes on with people was going on.

What Gilane is saying in relation to Gainsborough is the idea of the land and the people in it and this notion of sovereignty. Whereas what you seem to be saying when you look out of your rooftop is that there is no sovereignty over the urban landscape. It's a fractured space with all these people.

It's a broken space, broken completely, yes.

Most of all you don't even know who or what.

Yes, there were connections but the interesting thing about that is that, the homeless people demonstrated...

What I'm trying to suggest is that they try to have control, they can't but they try. How they use language, how they use their bodies in that landscape because no-one is going to necessarily have anything to do with them or much to do with them, they have an agency all of their own, although they are dependent on support like the St Simon's Community.

So, there are some nodal points but they are relatively few and far between. It's almost like they, the homeless, assert an authority and they often represent an awfulness that nobody wants to be near. People are frightened of or don't want to connect with... So, the sovereignty actually devolves – it's almost like they are sovereign in one sense but not really, it's an illusion that they live with, hence all the accidents they have etc because life is so fragile. It's shifting, moving, there's always conflict as well as togetherness.

Tremendous togetherness as a unit and then sudden fracturing, sudden breaking. People ganging up together and then slipping apart and you can almost see it happening. The backdrop to that from my roof would be the rats running along the side of the canal behind while they're doing all this in front.

That's an extraordinary image to end on, I think.

It's Tuesday 26th September 2017.

I saw you last week at the opening of Edward Woodman's exhibition at David Roberts Art Foundation when you, Stuart, made an intervention, an action called "Evening Tide" . It was a very moving piece which used only your body, your voice and a stick.

The work activated in the most extraordinary way the importance of Edward Woodman's photography.Edward Woodman was photographing spaces and artists and performances in the late '80s and early '90s which were all, in their different ways, about experimentation and risk taking and illustrate the potential for art to do something specific in terms of triggering a different relationship to our body and the space that we inhabit.

It had lightness running through a long thread, Stuart walked in, changed his shirt, we found a chair, he waited and made the action. There was no ceremony, you asked people to be silent, only because he was going to use his voice. We saw an action by an 83 year old person. It reminded me of a reading by Edward Said a long time ago where he talks about late works. He talks about Cavafy and the poem Waiting for the Barbarians. Late work is about a long thread, a deep fuse. We live in a culture of jeunesse, it's always about the young, it's always about the new, about the latest.

Late works strip away things that are no longer essential; maybe the body can't even carry it anymore – so there's both an urgency and depth, it's minimal...

I was thinking of the note, you sent me Maya after the last session that we had together in June, and you were picking up on my description of the Georgiana Collection and Stuart's work as being "slippery", and also talking about how Stuart's work is not really about the surface of things. What was very poignant and compelling about the action, Evening Tide was that it absolutely didn't feel like the surface of things, it felt like the thing embodied. David Thorp made that comment to you, Stuart, that this performance was the distillation of a lifetime of making performances and actions and interventions, distilled into something profound but apparently very simple.

And the ability to do that, to be so concise, be so economical, and yet articulate so much...

Actually these actions are common to us all so we recognise it inside of ourselves – it's not a cognitive thing. It becomes internal to the audience as well as the performer, which is different to looking at the performance.

Yes, I felt my body change, when you were crouching...

I wanted to ask, Stuart, because we also touched on the political, and I want you to talk today a little bit about how you understand political in relation to your practice, because I recognise the fact that your work is political but never prescriptive or dogmatic. But it is deeply political and I want you to talk about your understanding of what the political is in terms of your practice and then we can go back to the Evening Tide, perhaps.

It's a difficult question. I think one of the things that influenced me, has influenced me is Said on late work... so here I am now, into my eighties and it dawned on me that what he was saying was like a challenge, a real challenge, reading it, being my age. How can I make work which could raise itself to that level that he was talking about - I seem to remember something about that work can appear to be really bad and yet contain something that is utterly critical.

That reminds me of late Goya which arguably turns out to be done by his son. But within the terms of it being thought of as Goya's late work, when I first went to see Goya in

Madrid, it was a long time ago, I went downstairs and saw the late works and I got stuck there, couldn't leave. I stayed there for a long time. I couldn't quite understand why they were so good and bad all at the same time. I was much younger then, and that was fairly extraordinary to have that kind of experience in front of something which was so compelling and at the same time appeared to be awful. And what do we mean by awful? Maybe the awfulness was containing what the work really meant. And I also meant awful in relation to what I'm confronted with and I don't know how to cope with it and therefore as a means of leaving it and displacing it, call it awful and it's not – it's something extraordinary.

I can think of people saying, not artists, just people, people in my family say, "I don't give a shit anymore", I say what I feel, what I think and so on. As though they've reached a point where suddenly all the dross has dropped away and they're going to express themselves through who they are.

As to politics, I find it difficult to talk about the politics because I tend to start with a political idea and that almost always turns out to be superficial in the sense that my understanding of politics, what I thought the purpose of the work was, by evoking the term "political" and I think, again, if we go back to Said, there is an openness and that's the most important thing, it's beyond what we would call the political...I can only speak for myself.

I've been working on the voice, the human voice, for quite a while as Maya knows, in one way or another and it's proved to be deeply embarrassing and sort of difficult to do. But, I've persisted with it in a way and actually – Maya's got some responsibility for this because she said how she really seriously disliked it when I spoke in performances...

My response to that is to say "I'll go either backwards into pre-speech or forwards into post-speech, dealing with sound" so that's what I've been doing as a result of this comment which I didn't like very much, as you can imagine. But, one has to come to terms with these things and I thought well, maybe she's right.

So, then we come to post-speech, the pre-speech, the sense of what that actually can express and that's where I'm at in a way.

I've also been thinking about this is in relation to the Fibonacci series because Fibonacci takes us to infinity; there comes a point in all our lives where we actually come to the edge of the inhuman, what is not human, the non-human, and I've been thinking about that as well. The idea is that the voice, in its deepest expressions takes over and becomes impossible... you don't have to be an artist to produce an extraordinary sound and maybe a horrible sound or an awful, a ghastly sound, be in a ghastly situation... the real question with voice is to what extent it comes into contact with the non-human thereby pointing to a parameter that we're in, as a limitation. Who we are and how we live on an edge. It's what I've been trying to work towards and I've always tried to do that, with performance. Like reaching a point beyond the self, but through the self.

That's the political, beyond the self?

That's right. That's always been there but I wouldn't want to colour it with politics in the vulgar sense... it's a deeper intent though I'm not saying I get there.

Coming back to thinking about what you're saying and thinking about the intention and also the performance you did at Raven Row, I see you drawing connections between this current conjuncture and the immediate post-war moment in EuropeTwo artists come to mind when I think about your intervention at David Roberts Art Foundation last week, one

is Francis Bacon and his triptych Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion in the Tate which also incorporates the voice, the scream, the human body pushed to its very limits and therefore the notion of what it is to be human...

And the other artist is Samuel Beckett and - going back to Maya's point about distillation - the reduction of performance so that there is little in the way of props or stagecraft beyond a skeletal object or two.

There is hardly any language in Beckett's late works.

I have to tell you I did regret the fact that the stick flew away, out of my hand, because it was spontaneous and then I didn't have it. So, suddenly I'd lost it. I had a moment of thinking that was the only thing I had to hold me together in a way...

It was quite violent...

Yes, it was, I didn't intend to do that, it just happened. It flew and landed on somebody who spilt his wine on a woman's dress who came up to me afterwards and said she was so pleased at the fact that it happened that she was pregnant and to have been part of the action was great! – to be part of this event, she was very excited about it!

Like these incidental happenings...

Yes, the poor thing, flew into another kind of situation.

One of the things that happened for me was that initially you were contained and contained in yourself physically within a semi-circle, and you broke out of that and at that point of breaking out, the stick went too. It was like you punctured something.

Yes, the audience that made the semi-circle, I didn't make it, they did it.

That's true.

They did that intuitively because they gave me enough space, they were very kind. Not too big amount of space. It was right, what they did, and good.

I'd like to bring in the post-war art. Peter Hall died recently and I listened to an appreciation and then him talking about himself. He came from a working class family and went on to study. He had a commitment to subsidised art, in public, for the public. And of course he was the first person to put on a Beckett play – it landed on his desk, and he thought "it's strange, it'll do in August, in a dead month". He was a lucky man that it landed on his desk but at least he picked it up.

But there are parallels here. Stuart is one of those artists who represent that post-war generation, that commitment to an idea of public art which is not necessarily commercial. You, Stuart, have often talked about the idea of art being in public. But the other aspect is lineage of the political of English radicalism. One could think of William Morris, for example, and Blake, who are referenced now and again in Stuart's work.

Talking about Bacon and Beckett, lots of people mentioned Beckett and Bacon in relation to Stuart's work, and to an extent, Pinter as well.

Going back to the idea of speech and performance, I did have this strong objection but it's a conceptual and a formal objection because I think the nature of the work doesn't require story-telling and the key to this lies in the concept of the lyrical.

Godot is a lyrical work, its essential qualities are lyrical and not narrative. Narrative requires an entirely other formal structure as well as a story.

I think it's a really interesting area. You used a number of words about pre-speech and post-speech and we've talked about boundaries and borders. There are two other things I would like to explore. We can take them together or separately. One is the idea of going beyond language and representation and I think that is connected in your work, and part of that is a recognition of the limitations of language and representation in a literal sense. So, how, as an artist, you can push those limitations and push them away or push beyond them.

And the other is Beckett's Waiting for Godot and the two protagonists Vladimir and Estragon who are homeless. They are foreigners, probably migrants or refugees.

They are disenfranchised, disembodied people and the only thing that's embodied in the play is the tree. The tree is the only thing that's centred or has any kind of roots.

Could we talk first of all about this idea of going beyond the limitations of language and representation...

Beckett comes up and in 1970, I was part of a group engaged in forming an artists' union and I took it upon myself to go to Belfast and Dublin. I met people including some people who would be politically persona non grata, in terms of the politics of the situation etc.

Later I began to visit Belfast School of Art between, I don't know when it was exactly but certainly up to 1974, an intense and difficult period in the Troubles. I was engaged by the students' use of language, more the students than anyone else. Art school had both Protestants and Catholics, both on the staff, but also the student body and so it was like an unspoken neutral ground. Language was culturally distinct from Anglo-Saxon, and I found it stimulating.

In the process of using my body and making... I came to the conclusion: why can't I use my voice? There's no reason not to and so what Maya recognised as being an abhorrent or difficult aspect actually has that kind of source to it that I became fascinated with. The use of language as expressed in Ireland, and the way in which people spoke. Something that Maya found difficult when we went to Ireland.

A way of thinking about the use of the body and the voice, and of course, using the voice opens up a whole lot of things. It's a shift in thinking about how one might use the body.

What does it change?

I don't know what it changes but I know that it is a change in itself and it's a change because the thinking feeling process can be expressed through language as well as through the body. Now, we come to another problem which is why performance is not theatre and why theatre can contain aspects of performance. It seems to me there has to be different parts of the brain which are in use in terms of how one uses one's body and how one expresses one's thoughts, and that they don't necessarily mix together so one will take precedence over the other.

What I found was, and this is a contradiction, that if I was speaking, I forgot about what I was doing with my body. If I was working with my body, I couldn't express – they were essential contradictions and that became a real problem for me.

What does that reveal about the essential difference between a painter and a performer...

Theatre, though I wouldn't say all theatre but I think the majority of theatre is, how does it start – script, the development of the script, the actual illusion of a space – we believe this is a room within which events take place – there's a tree... And so the real difference is that the actor learns the script to - one of the most extraordinary things in theatre, I think, is the actor learning a script and then performing, maybe one, two, three, four, fifty times. Each night is going to be different because each interpretation by the actor has, by its nature, to be different.

In theatre you find the collective, i.e. more than one actor creating a situation where moments arise which are unique and lift everybody. This can happen in performance but not for the same reasons at all.

Performance has no real script, that's my interpretation of performance – they have people

who use scripts, of course, in performance and it doesn't interest me, so I'm talking about really probably my own and some other art performers' works where there is no script, so the confrontation is with the stepping from what we would describe as everyday life into a condition which, where the struggle to raise the level of attention, has to be undergone in public. This is part of the process and at a certain moment, in certain performances, I reach a stage where suddenly I become aware that everybody's paying attention. It's an intense silence – everybody is paying attention.

This is where the public comes in, we are all together then, we are all affected by everything that's taking place, we are in a positive condition – put it that way. At that point, I recognise I don't have to do anything, in other words, I go from making actions to being - from doing to being. I can recognise it once I get to the point of being.

Does that happen during the course of the action?

Yes, it does, it happens.

Does it mark the end, the conclusion?

Not necessarily, it depends. If I'm doing something for two weeks, it goes up and down.

Ultimately the performance becomes more austere and it becomes more centred, and by then, we're probably about three quarters of the way through and the rest of it is like a drift – not downwards but a drift of ongoingness until we drift out at the end.

This is the difference between narrative and the lyrical form. Theatre is about narrative form, from its beginning, from the Greek song, text is the anchor of the theatre. You have to follow the narrative flow.

In the lyrical, also Greek, it's about the carnival, it's more the idea of abandonment. Rituals and secrets of the lyrical form is also a contention between the narrative and the lyrical because from the Greeks onwards, narrative form represents hierarchy, theatre, orator, poet... It's more ordered which is what built culture is. It's how we understand the "idea".

The lyrical is anarchic, dark, secret, abandonment of the bacchanal, beastly and so on. Where the script is lost and there's always the danger of things getting out of hand, there's always the danger of taking over of the streets, which is why, in the Greek state, the narrative form had the theatre built for it, the lyrical form was out in the woods, outside of the polis. This also refers to a distinction of the political which you are talking about, that it's not necessarily, automatically against the state but because of its historic form, its on the outside of the accepted frame.

One of the things you were talking about just now Stuart in terms of going from doing to being is another form of breaking down or erasure which is distance.The distance between the performer and the audience, or between the public and an action or intervention. In your work there is a movement to remove that distance.

Participating bodies are oscillating together in the same space.

Yes, but interestingly it's not about accessibility in the sense that people talk about it now...

I often go back to the text by John Cornford, Saint John, Christopher Cornford's brother who wrote a history of theatre and in it he talked about the evolution, how theatre came about especially in Greece, and prior to that, his view was that there were no actors, there was no audience – the point of separation hadn't been reached and it's in Greek theatre

you get the stage, where it becomes a hierarchical structure. I've been very interested in this ever since I read it, this particular sense of coming together, everybody is one.

Everybody is one in a panic too, panic is a sudden togetherness for a different purpose, a different condition where suddenly you find everybody is one and you can't remove one element, there's no separation.

When I talked about the circle made by the audience, I think I was right, that they naturally do that as a non-hierarchical body. When I was in Marrakech, when the storytellers arrived the audience formed an intuitive circle, everything is done in a circle, and everybody sits around. There's something fundamental about that so the circle isn't accidental.

We all share archaic memory.

I want to pick up on that because there is something fundamental here. The broadcaster David Attenborough was filming in Australia amongst an Aboriginal community, and he was talking about how the geology of the area had changed: thousands of years before there had been a kind of tsunami which had dramatically changed the landscape and the everyday lives of this community. There was a dance, still enacted by the community, which recorded that event which took place thousands of years earlier. The collective memory was embodied physically…...

We get diseases lying dormant in our bodies from when there wasn't oxygen but carbon dioxide. This is a scientific proposition that some cancers derive from that point. So something that was toxic to us and then a change in the atmosphere and humans evolved, but the archaic, whether human or not, became part of what we are.

How far is your performance about creating the conditions for us to collectively remember or be mindful...

That's beyond my frame.

Yes, at another time and in a different way, I was very interested in the idea of the Peterlee Project and we've talked about that, where it was about collective history, common history, and a sense of common history done in living memory to do with mining and miners and family and village and all that. So, there is there that sense of what draws all of us together at a grassroots level which gives the new town of Peterlee some anchors.

I'm also thinking about how the artist, you, and the actions and conditions that you create act as a trigger or catalyst for something else to happen within...

I'm trying to nudge you to talk here a bit more about the difference between the making of objects and paintings, and the performative.

This question is embedded in the dominance of narrative where the text is formally organised in performance; where we know what the end is going to be so that there is no possibility of risk.

Because the stakes are high, you cannot afford disasters, actually even the radical gesture is a rehearsed gesture for those reasons. Going back to the action the other night, it's absolutely a condition and acceptance of risk as a primary vehicle because if you know it, you can't do it. But that also determines the position of the institution in relation to the performance.

The best that is institutionally possible is a rehearsed narration.

What we're seeing is the closing down and also the desire, what you were talking about, the desire for the known and the fixed which inevitably takes us into an authoritarian space and so that open-endedness, and also the idea that, for me, one of the things that makes artists so important, artists who take risks like Stuart, is that they open up the space of the imagination.

I always say to people, the reason we need artists more than we need politicians is because we need artists to imagine the potential of what could be which we don't already know because politicians simply reproduce what already exists.

So do artists nowadays.

That again comes back full circle in a way to this question of late works. If you think you have a limited amount of time, then you have to re-attend to what is urgent and important because otherwise, the rest is just... jeunesse which imagines infinite time.

There's a kind of beauty in that too, the sense that there is infinite time to do anything and everything .

Artists' late works are often dismissed and I think partly it is because artists do things which they're not expected to do and people get annoyed – I thought I knew you, I thought I knew what your work was all about but you go and...

I think Guston is a good example of that in his way. He was on the WPA, I don't know if he was but I think he was, then he began to move towards surrealism like a lot of people did, a lot of artists did in New York at the time because refugees were coming from Europe and so on. Then gets his breakthrough with what could be called "abstract expressionism" although there were those who thought he was more an abstract impressionist as opposed to an expressionist... and the move into what is almost cartoon like paintings with the Ku Klux Klan. One discovers that he was really interested in comics all along, from when he was in his teens. His gallery stopping, a whole set of complications that he had in his life. There's a long period, I don't know, 12 years or whatever it is, of some remarkable works which at the time, were shocking. They still resonate as having a convincing living presence. The head in bed with its fag and all those pieces.

He is a good example of a late worker. He was always good but he is really something else in his later work which affected so many people.

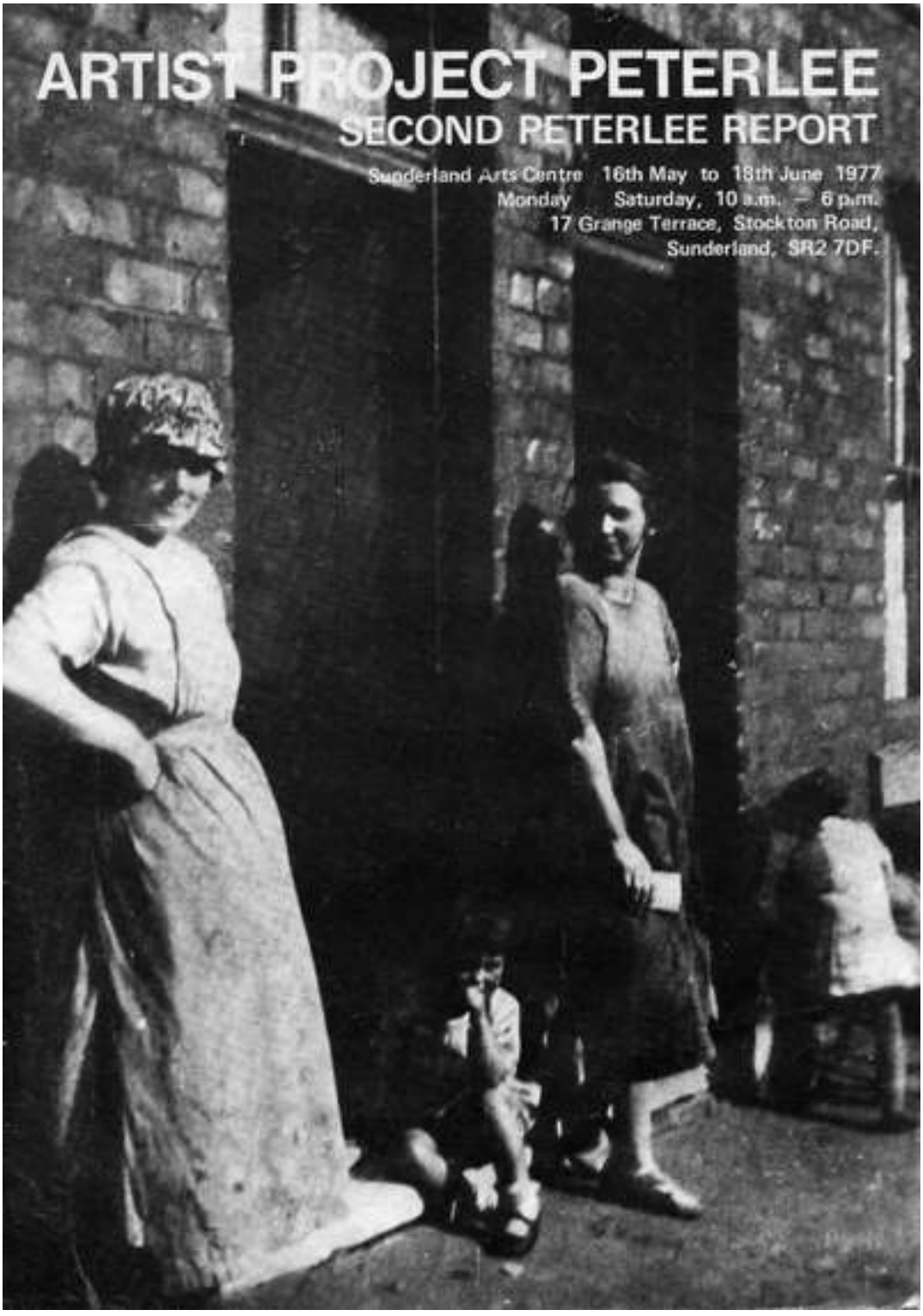
So what's next, Stuart? What's on the horizon?

Less and less, I think.

Stuart Brisley

Gilane Tawadros

Maya Balcioglu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