

Stuart Brisley: State of Denmark

Modern Art Oxford 20 September to 16 November

I arrive at Modern Art Oxford at lunchtime. Diners in the gallery's cafe are chomping to a soundtrack of Stuart Brisley violently retching. This sound, floating up from the basement, comes from Brisley's 1973 film *Arbeit Macht Frei* (Work Makes Free) that documents a reworking of his performance *And for today... nothing*, 1972. The videos at Modern Art Oxford offer some context for Brisley's solo exhibition and the length of the showreel (over 2.5 hours) gives a sense of the volume of his work. I am most familiar with Brisley's radical, bodily performance, but this work constitutes only 15 years of the artist's 60-year practice.

For 'State of Denmark', guest curator David Thorp brings together performance, sculpture, painting, photography and public art from the 1970s onwards. The show can be seen as a series of responses to political moments in the artist's life. A conceptually tight triangle of works sits at the core of the exhibition. These pieces take the form of a large, specially commissioned sculpture, *State of Denmark*, 2014, a room of photographs and documents, *Peterlee Project*, 1976-77, and a triptych of photographs of a poster for a Marxist summer school in various states of defacement, *It Can Be Done*, 1986. Each announces an aspect of the artist's anti-institutional politics.

The first, like many of his works since the 1970s, explores Brisley's republicanism. (In the same gallery, images of the performance *Before The Mast*, 2013, show an investigation into the introduction, after the French Revolution, of a new, decimal calendar.) A rectangle positioned high on the wall recalls a royal box whose inhabitants might condescendingly survey the gallery. A metal crown looms over a large wooden wedge. The wedge cuts forwards through the gallery space. One side of it is dressed with a highly finished royal blue wall, on the inside of which sits a graphite drawing of a royal prince. This represents the monarchy. Permeable and ad hoc, the other side is half clad with boards filled with visitors' – the people's – comments.

This piece is somewhat overloaded with symbolism – the crown, royal blue, colours of the Union Flag – but its message feels pertinent in an exhibition that opened the day after the Scottish referendum was taken. The boards filled with visitors' doodles and inevitable comments about the pointlessness of contemporary art also contain a number of references to inequality and dissatisfaction with the London-centrism of contemporary Britain.



Stuart Brisley
State of Denmark 2014
installation view

The most profound work in this exhibition is *Peterlee Project*, Brisley's exploration of industry, housing, community and heritage in and around the New Town of Peterlee in County Durham. Throughout 1976 and 1977 Brisley amassed an archive with the aim of engendering debate and political action. The project was a vehicle through which people could inscribe some of the narratives of their lives onto the new planes of concrete designed by Victor Pasmore. When many public art projects continue to be conservative, this piece should be seized as an example: it did not defer to the art world but maintained the position of a democratic study that stretched and expanded performance into social action.

Commissioned 30 years after Peterlee was founded and 32 years after the Labour landslide of 1945 that gave rise to the NHS and the nationalisation of many industries including the local coal mines, this work forms a pivot between the town's political, industrial and economic past and future. Peterlee sprang from the perceived decrepitude of cheaply built mining villages; the report that triggered its development was titled 'Farewell Squalor'. The archive begins in 1900, the year when the first mines were sunk in the surrounding area. Two years after Brisley's project, Margaret Thatcher was elected – an event that would change the face of British industry, begin the process of dismantling social welfare and further entrench the class structure that Brisley and his peers were so anxious to demolish.

In Brisley's oeuvre, human activity, industry and commerce produce ordure. This is seen in the US junkyards of his early work, the slag heaps of Peterlee, the ordure of his performances, his publishing arm, his work at the Freud Museum, and the lock-ups depicted in three large paintings *Missing Text*, *Interregnum 1-3*,

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