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Dead history, live art: encountering the past with Stuart Brisley — [Source link](#)

Sanja Perovic

Institutions: King's College London

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Author Information:

Dr. Sanja Perovic

French Department
Virginia Woolf Building
22 Kingsway
King's College London
WC2B 6LE
020 7848 2136
sanja.perovic@kcl.ac.uk

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a remarkable convergence between performance art and history, with the ‘historical turn’ in performance art mirrored by a ‘performative turn’ within history. This raises the question: can performance itself be considered historical knowledge? This article pursues this question through the work of Stuart Brisley, the British multi-media artist well-known for his durational works from the late 1960s, some of which were also feats of physical endurance. Brisley’s oeuvre engages with a number of historical conflicts. It also radically questions the authenticity of the live event and its primacy in our understanding of both performance art and history. Drawing on unpublished testimony, this article considers the uses of history in Brisley’s work, focusing on the French Revolution. In particular, it assesses Brisley’s use of the 10-day week of the French revolutionary calendar as a durational framework for a series of works from the early 1970s to the present.

Keywords: Stuart Brisley, performance, live art, history, duration, chronology, French revolutionary calendar.

Since it emerged in the 1960s, performance art has typically been associated with the presence of the artist's own body and its use to perform an action or series of actions. This conjunction of physical presence and presentness in time – something happening in the here and now – has distinguished performance art from other types of art as well as other types of time-based performance. Real skin is cut, real food consumed, real vomit spewed. Such liveness is frequently evoked as a guarantee of authenticity. Anything can happen and nothing can be edited out. At the same time, due to its eventful nature, performance art has also been concerned with strategies of documentation, in particular how the same event can be registered in different media: photography, film, video and so forth (Kaye 2007; Heathfield and Jones 2012). In this sense, performance art shares parallel concerns with the historical method, which too is based on a core distinction between live events and their subsequent reconstruction through documentation. For both performance art and history, the live event is that which by definition nothing in the future can change. Subsequent events or the discovery of additional events might change our understanding of the event but not the event itself, which can only be experienced once.

Until recently, however, the relation between performance art and the historical disciplines has mostly been one of mutual suspicion. After all, in its emphasis on presence, performance seems far removed from history which privileges 'distance' and events firmly in the past. Key terms that repeat in testimonials of performance art include 'the body', 'live', 'event', 'presence' 'immediacy', 'immersion', 'experience' and 'action'. These terms are antithetical to the historical method in which, traditionally, distance from the past ensured that the historian could learn what contemporaries of the event could not. Whereas performance art typically seeks to impact the spectator in some way, academic history sharply distinguishes the impartial observer from the participating actor. This distinction is reinforced through a

very different understanding of the image and function of historical time. Whereas performance tends to view the past as something that persists in the present, the dominant image of time for the academic historian is that of a receding past. In Chris Lorenz's felicitous image, the historian's past is akin to an icicle, 'breaking off from the present on its own through temporal distance or weight' (2014, 511).

Yet despite their opposing, even antithetical approaches, we are witnessing a remarkable rapprochement of performance and history. Numerous observers have noted the 'historical turn' in the artworld, whether in the archival impulse since the 1990s, the numerous exhibits devoted to the intersection of art and history, or the concern with re-enactment, either of previous performances or other events from the past (Foster 2004; Merewether 2006; Enwezor 2008; Schneider 2011; Bishop 2012). This is compounded by the increasing tendency of performance actions to take place in – and be commissioned by – museums, which, in turn, are concerned with archiving their growing collections of 'live art' (see Soussloff 2014).

This historical turn within the artworld has been accompanied by a 'performative turn' within the historical field, accentuated by the exponential growth of interactive museums, popular history channels, re-enactment communities and preservation societies (de Groot 2009). Historians are emphasizing the importance of 'affective' relations to the past (Phillips 2013; Agnew and Lamb 2004, 2009) or seeking ways in which re-enactment might provide a more spontaneous or 'authentic' knowledge about the past than the 'distant history presented in textbooks' (see Schneider 13). Others point to the forensic value of performance in reconstructing historical context, particularly where the record is missing (Giannachi, Kaye and Shanks 2012). The rise of this so-called 'forensic sensibility' (Leeson and Shanks 2012, 225) can be linked to the partial collapse of the traditional categories used to filter and

understand the historical past, inherited from the nineteenth century (Lorenz 2014; Hartog 2003, 125; Gumbrecht 2014). Some leading theorists have even speculated that historical discourse might be a form of social action or ‘performance’ that regulates the boundaries between past, present and future (see Lorenz 2014: 13).

This apparent rapprochement of history and performance raises the questions: Under what framework, can performance itself be considered historical knowledge? What is the role of physical, lived time in reactivating a relation to the past? How can performance be used to think critically about history?

In what follows, I explore these questions through the work of Stuart Brisley, the English performance and multi-media artist whose career is now in its sixth decade. A founding figure of British performance art, he became well-known in the 1960s and 70s for a series of actions, some of long duration, that were also feats of endurance, as he subjected himself to hunger, extreme discomfort and exhaustion. But he is equally known for an oeuvre that engages with the history of political conflict: revolution, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, WWI and II, labour history. In each case, a past or ongoing conflict is explored for what it can tell us about present-day tensions and contradictions. As I show below, primarily with reference to the French Revolution, history is an important subject-matter for Brisley, providing both the content and temporal frame for a number of his actions. At the same time, Brisley’s scrupulous regard for the differences between performance and history avoids some of the more exaggerated claims that performance can ‘make’ and ‘remake’ history.

Revolution as Duration and Subject

A measurable entity, duration is linked to metamorphosis, the time it takes for any one thing to change. Duration is an essential element of both performance art, often simply referred to as ‘durational art’, and historical analysis. But while both presuppose duration as an essential framework, what happens within that frame belongs to what is more commonly referred to as event-time. In contrast to duration, which presupposes a uniform time of measure, events refer to qualitative experiences of time: they assume the perspective of agents, someone who acts or makes a decision (see Smith 1969). What, then, is the relation between time’s measure, which is invariable, and the event, the perception of which is subject to change?

Brisley’s performances offer a chance to reflect upon both the subjective and objective aspects of duration. Brisley began his durational works in the 1960s out of an interest in everyday tasks, including simple biological needs such as eating and sleeping. The choice of 10, 12 or 14 days was, in this sense, pragmatic. For instance, two weeks is the approximate time it takes for food to rot. In *And For today...Nothing* (1972), Brisley immersed himself in a bath of black water for approximately two hours each day for two weeks while a pile of offal rotted beside him [Figure 1]. Michael Newman suggests that the iconic status of this action is due to its resemblance to Jacques-Louis David’s famous painting *The Death of Marat* (2015, 10). Brisley implicitly juxtaposed his own living body with the represented (dead) body of Marat. He further contrasted this with the approximately two weeks it takes for flesh to decay. These juxtapositions served to highlight the tension between two opposing aspects of our experience of duration: as continuity - the way a given identity persists over time - and as ceaseless change - the way any given form also unravels over time.

But how do we represent the moment of change itself? Both David’s painting and Brisley’s performance allude to the moment of death, when one identity or substance changes into

another. In David's painting, Marat's dying body is still recognisable as the living Marat. Change is represented in the form of an ongoing continuity with a previous identity, that of Marat's live body. Contrast this with Brisley's act of sitting in a bathtub, which required him to endure both the discomfort of cold waste water and the stench of rotting offal, eventually so unbearable that he was asked to leave by the other artists exhibiting in the gallery. By stretching the distinction between the living body and dead flesh to its physical limit, Brisley's action prised apart the timeframes of life and death that David's painting arguably collapses.

The challenge that Brisley's performance posed to David's painting can also be directed to its own photographic record. The odourless, almost colourless photographs through which many of us (including myself) approach this action today, frame several moments out of an extended duration. They do not, however, capture the action itself, much less how it activated the reviled elements of both human waste and dead, yet unburied, flesh. As Maya Balcioglu, Stuart Brisley's frequent collaborator, notes, photos function as an afterlife (personal communication 4 September 2015). They neither reproduce nor record the singular event but function in a different timeframe, that of a distant 'historical' reflection upon a work, and not as primary evidence in themselves. After the performance the photos become 'alive', generative of new discussion, while the once live performance shrinks in perspective, the diminishing power of memory compounded by a decreasing circle of witnesses. This suggests that the past is an indistinct phenomenon that always recedes from view, even within first-hand memories of the event.

In this conscious embrace of multiple layers of temporality, we encounter the first difference between performance and history. Although performance, like any action, takes place in linear time, it stages the break-down of chronological time as a framework for understanding events,

enabling the past to appear as incomplete, unfinished. To return once more to David's painting, part of its novelty resides in the way that David's dedication to Marat is dated Year II. Marat's death is not recorded using the conventional timeline – such as the date of 13 July 1793, boldly scripted in the letter to Charlotte Corday still held out in Marat's dying hand. Rather it is inscribed according to the time line of the recently instituted French revolutionary calendar. This calendar reflected the extraordinarily ambitious attempt, on the part of the French revolutionaries, to mark a clean break with the past. Year I was supposed to begin on 22 September 1792, the day after monarchy was officially abolished, and the new Republic proclaimed. However by 1793, when Marat was assassinated, the calendar, although proclaimed, had yet to be established. It was eventually instituted in fall 1793 (and backdated to 1792), the same period David was completing his painting. David thus chose to frame Marat's death according to the Revolution's intended, *projected* time frame. The conspicuous use of Year II is a clear warning that the king is dead, the past is past and there is no turning back. At the same time, the painting, like the radical calendar, expresses the attempt to give this declaration of new time an enduring *form*. Given this unsettled temporality, we can say that David framed his work by referring to a *missing* calendar – a proclaimed Year I that was not yet in place because the conflict between the past and present was still ongoing, as Marat's own assassination made clear.

David resolves this problem of missing revolutionary beginnings – an unlocalizable Year I – by monumentalizing Marat as a martyr to the Revolution, made not of decaying flesh but of some other, more durable, substance. This is evident in the classicizing pose or the smooth, marmoreal skin devoid of Marat's well-known disease. Brisley's action, in contrast, suggests that even this heroic declaration of Republican time suppresses the finite, embodied nature of human time, the joint source of our experience of birth and regeneration as well as rot and

decay. It suggests that the revolutionary problem of how to replace the executed king remains unresolved so long as a transcendental political substance – whether represented by the eternal, undying body of the king or a perpetually dying Marat – trumps a *mortal*, finite, democratic substance.

I've dwelt on this example because an important, if largely overlooked aspect, of Brisley's durational art, is that it too is framed by the French revolutionary calendar – in this case, the 10-day revolutionary week, which has structured a number of Brisley's actions since the 1970s. The Republican calendar links together the themes of republicanism, atheism and equality that run through Brisley's oeuvre. It also enables us to connect the political content of Brisley's works to their temporal form. For the revolutionary calendar did not just attempt to begin history anew in a Year I. It also intended to alter every aspect of people's relation to time: religious, social and political. Months were renamed after the seasons and the seven-day Judeo-Christian week was replaced by a new ten-day week called the *décade*. Human time and its agents became the material through which a break with the religious and political structures of the past was to be accomplished. The Republican calendar, thus, represents the first instance in which a proclaimed cut in time was used to perform social action; that duration itself was conceived as the material through which to effectuate social and political change. As I will show, this understanding of revolutionary time is essential to Brisley's own position as an artist committed to keeping the revolution alive, not as a dead past but as a future whose consequences remain undetermined (see Thorp 2014, 4; Newman 2015, 27-29).

The revolutionary week structures the eponymous *10 days* (Berlin 1973) when Brisley spent the Christmas period from Dec 21 to 31 sitting at a long table at which three meals a day were served for ten days. He ate nothing, offering the food instead to passers-by, to highlight

the conspicuous consumption of the festive season. This action was re-visited in 1978 at the Acme Gallery London as a reflection on Britain's upstairs/downstairs class system. The food not eaten was left to rot upstairs, while downstairs the action was replicated as a festive, abundant setting for anyone who wanted to eat. The revolutionary week reappeared in *Bourgeois Manners: Brute Force and Bloody Ignorance* (London, 1988). Brisley worked for 10 days using wasted products dug up from a private garden in East London as well as air, water and fire, to underscore the wastage of resources, natural and human, within a class system consolidated through small property-owners. The 10-day week also framed the 2010 performance *The Missing Subject* in which Brisley shut himself up in an abandoned shop over a period of ten days, adjacent to the PEER Gallery in London, shortly after the Tories came to power, during a period of hung parliament. There he adopted the persona of his alter ego, R.Y. Sirb, curator of an imaginary museum of ordure, and rearranged the detritus left behind by the various failed businesses which had occupied the shop: a reflection on the bankrupt institutions - and lost political opportunities - of a compromised coalition government. Most recently, in *Before the Mast* (London 2013), Brisley performed an action for one revolutionary hour (approximately 2.5 hours) per day over a period of ten days, evoking the guise of Sylvain Maréchal, the revolutionary militant who first devised the idea of a revolutionary calendar.

How, then, does temporal form express political commitment? And what is the function of the 'authentic' historical referent in these works? On a basic level, the 10-day week is a declaration, inviting the public to consider whatever happens over the course of any 10-day action as belonging to one and the same time, that of the revolutionary situation. As Brisley notes, once declared a task has to be carried out. So too with revolutions. Once proclaimed, any given revolution has to be carried out, regardless of its consequences, or eventual success and failure

of its outcome. On another level, the use of the 10-day week also points to the contradictory aspects of any demand for total, political change. As Reinhart Koselleck (2002) has observed, the failure of the original Republican calendar derives from a fundamental contradiction between linear and cyclical time. The revolutionaries instituted a new calendar to express the sense of standing on the brink of a new history, whose future was radically unknown. Yet they mapped this linear understanding of history – in which the future always differs from the past - onto the everyday lived experience of time, which depends on repeatable patterns derived from nature. Brisley's work is characterized by a similar tension between the demand for transformative change and the recursive structures of everyday life that constrain it. This includes the imperatives of cyclical, biological time: eating, sleeping, disposing of human waste and so on.

The calendar's failure, thus, to establish itself as an enduring form means that it functions, at best, as a missing frame. This understanding of revolutionary time a *missing frame*, already implied in David's aforementioned painting, is essential to understanding Brisley's own practice, for it highlights the difficulty of any action to 'thicken and spread' (Brisley's terms) into the social world. This brings us to the importance of failure as a heuristic device in Brisley's practice. Brisley is known for frequently stopping his performances before the allotted time is reached in order to declare them a failure. As Brisley notes, such declarations of pre-emptive failure serve an almost Brechtian function. Breaking the frame, they highlight that social transformation remains a future task. They also encourage those present to consider the 'inadequacy of the terms success or failure in art activity' (personal communication 4 Feb 2014).

Here we can locate the second challenge performance poses to historical analysis: it blocks

the sense of an ending. A historian typically reconstructs a series of events into a chronological sequence by reading backwards, from a position outside the situation he or she describes. By knowing where the sequence of events ends, she is able to identify a plausible chain of cause and effect, hence the importance of chronological controls for the historian. Such a perspective, however, overlooks the importance of what the sociologist Andrew Abbott has called the ‘intermediate present.’ As Abbott (2007:86) explains, the narrative emphasis on beginnings and ends means that for historical narrative the ‘intermediate present disappears...because we know ahead of time where the historical story ends’. This neglects the ‘fact that each one of the intermediate events was a present at one point, and hence open to all sorts of realizations, not just the one that obtained in actuality’ (2007: 86).

Brisley’s durational works, in contrast, force both the artist and participants to focus on precisely this ‘intermediate present’. In each 10-day performance what Brisley calls a ‘broad frame of a period of time’ is necessary for the perception of time to ‘shift and change’ (Brisley, Perovic, White 2013a, 2). Since the outcome of any declared task is impossible to choreograph over such a length of time, this frees it from any notion of goal or ultimate purpose. It also exposes the artist to maximum risk – whether that of failure, or of damage to the artist’s own body during extreme feats of endurance. Certainly Brisley is not alone in using a broad timeframe; Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano have all used long durations. But the difference here concerns the declarative force of the revolutionary week, which refers both to the duration of the performance and to a historical reality that lies outside that frame. Paradoxically, this declaration of the artist’s own commitment, serves to move the focus away from the artist and towards the public revelation of the process. By blocking the decay into ‘decadent individualism’ (Brisley [1976] 2013), the declaration enables space to ‘take the public form, rather than just being in the public’ (Brisley, Perovic, White

2013a, 3). This shifts the focus from a pre-existing subject (for example the artist himself as a subject to whom effects of the performance can be attributed) towards a *future* subject, the one created by virtue of participation in the event. It is in this sense that Brisley identifies his durational works as a return to an original ‘day one...almost like an entry into day one of the revolutionary period, at least by implication.’ (3).

I will return to this analogy below. For now it suffices to note that the intermediate present is maintained only if the action succeeds in blocking its own historical reception. In particular, if it resists the tendency of retrospective analysis to elevate the artist as the historical subject of his or her work, in place of direct engagement with the subject-matter. It has become something of a commonplace to assume that performance art, on account of its evanescence, defiantly resists its own historicization. For instance, it is hard to disagree with Erika Fischer-Lichte’s observation that performance art tends to ‘collapse the distinction between production and reception’, making ‘the aesthetics of production, work and reception as three heuristic categories seem questionable, if not obsolete’ (2008: 18). Fischer-Lichte attributes this to the self-generative character of performance. As meaning is generated through interaction between the artist and participants, it can be located neither at the point of origin (in the artist’s intentions), nor at the point of reception (there is no pre-existing ‘work’ for the audience to receive).

Such an understanding of performance, however, tacitly assumes that a work can be fixed in its original moment of appearance. It assumes that a performance, like any other historical event, only occurs once and that its ‘original’ meaning is roughly equivalent to its authentic ‘historical’ meaning. The resulting inclination is to contextualize works within a ‘synchronic slice of time’ rather than to consider how actions operate across time, soliciting new audiences

in new situations (see Dimock 1997,1061; Felski 2011: 578). This historicizing effect can be seen in the way even so-called evanescent performances have solidified over time, as they have entered museum archives and art criticism. On this view the dilemma for the reception of performance art appears unsolvable: do we historicize the action's original context – and thereby miss the 'intermediate present' of the original action – or do we de-contextualize it and therefore risk missing the original context in which the action took place?

For Brisley, however, this dichotomy between permanence and impermanence is not only false but fundamentally undemocratic. All aesthetic production, not just live performance, is finite insofar as people attribute short-lived meanings to it. A performance is analogous to day one of a revolutionary situation precisely for its capacity to unravel over time – whether over the course of a 10-day period itself, or subsequently, as photos and films generated by the performance interact with new audiences and new horizons of expectation. The crucial difference therefore is not between the authentic 'live' event and its permanent record, but between the 'relative durations of the impermanent' (Brisley 2007, 83).

One way in which Brisley blocks the historicizing effect of reception is to insist on collaboration. The performance does not end with the live event but is taken up and reflected in new works, created either by himself or in collaboration with others. The result is an embedded or nested effect in which a new work is used to frame both a previous performance and to reflect on the situation in which it took place. Brisley's website notes the term *mise-en-abîme* as one way of understanding the relation of frame to performance. Michael Newman has proposed that this *mise-en-abîme* structure can be extended to the ensemble of Brisley's works, including performance, painting, photography and installation (2015, 32). On this view, retrospective analysis is not exclusively situated at the end of a live, now dead, past but is part

of an ongoing oscillation between action and reflection. Rather than imprison the original performance in what Brisley calls the ‘tyranny of the moment of its revelation’, retrospective analysis forms part of an extended process ‘influential in defining the form, feel and outcome of the original concept’ (2007, 88).

The remainder of this article focuses on Brisley’s recent 10-day performance *Before the Mast* (2013), a collaboration between the artist, myself and the writer Tony White. As the author of a recent book on the French revolutionary calendar, I provided some of the historical referents which served as parameters of the action. As a witness of some of the action, I also participated in several post-performance conversations. One could say that I witnessed the action ‘up close’, affectively, alongside other members of the participating public, as well as ‘distantly’ as someone who, alongside the other collaborators analyzed the events retrospectively. What I offer here is a description of my experience which is also intended as a reframing. Can performance extend beyond its original context as an art activity to reveal something about the historical subject-matter of the French Revolution?

Before the Mast

The action *Before the Mast* unfolded over one revolutionary hour (approximately 2.5. hours) for one revolutionary week. It began at 14.00 on 21 November (the month of Frimaire on the Republican calendar) and started half an hour later each day. It took place in an eighteenth-century Georgian townhouse on John Street, near Grey’s Inn, in a room that was being stripped down by the gallery owner. Before entering the room visitors were greeted by a reprinted poster from Year II which celebrated the Festival of Reason in the Commune of Ris, just outside Paris, whose inhabitants had replaced their patron saint with Brutus. According to the poster, the

festival was to culminate in a bonfire, destroying all the symbols associated with the religious and feudal past. In addition, thus, to the revolutionary calendar which scheduled the performance, the public was also confronted with a second frame: a poster announcing a popular, carnivalesque celebration of Year II, which pointed outside the frame of the action, to a festive time of the street that occurred in a different country, over two hundred years ago. Contrasting this 'revolution from below', the performance took place in a dedicated gallery space, reminiscent of an eighteenth-century salon. All aspects of this space became part of the action: the newspapers stripped from the walls were crumpled and torn, the dado was climbed, the fireplace scribbled upon. Additional objects included several chairs, a trestle table, a rubbish bin, string, a measuring stick and a mirror, which was first propped up on the fireplace and later became an active component of the action. The public viewed the performance via a gap between out-swinging double doors which led into the room and were held open by a taut string. At any given time only a handful of people could fit, acknowledging that people moved in and out at arbitrary junctions over the long duration.

Viewing for the audience required physical exertion, whether straining to see or acknowledging the inevitable blockage of someone else's shoulder or head or leg. At times the mirror was used to extend the sight-line beyond what any one person could naturally see. Other times it reflected the public back to itself. We became aware that our viewpoint too resulted from occupying a position in space. The overall effect was of multiple frames and several perspectives. Combined with the features of this elegant, geometrical eighteenth-century reception room, the result was almost Rococo [figure 2]. The arrangement acknowledged the action as well as the frame, and drew attention to the material basis of all perception, as in the Rococo manner. What mattered was the changing situations of both viewer and viewed, and the variable intensity this interaction assumed over time.

The artist himself was inconspicuously dressed. At times he wore a sweatshirt with Commoner written on it. On some occasions this became an ominous prop when he covered his head and made gagging noises. Other times he wore whitewashed glasses and made choking and wheezing sounds, sometimes with the mirror held to his throat as if it was a decapitation device or guillotine [figure 3]. At all times however he wore a distinctive prosthetic nose [figure 4]. Brisley notes that it was mostly worn to establish ‘distance from his own body’ – to emphasize the difference between having a body and being a body so to speak. The exaggerated nose, however, also provided a focal point, alternatively communicating a comic or melancholy mood, much like the nose of a clown. In fact there were several noses which, at one point were perched on the string dividing the audience from the performance space.

At least one of these noses was modelled on the rather prominent proboscis of the French revolutionary militant Sylvain Maréchal, who first devised the idea for a revolutionary calendar in 1788, a year before the transformative events of the Revolution took place (figure 5). Maréchal was also notorious for being an outspoken regicide, atheist and one of the first anarchists. He subsequently participated in the *Conspiracy of Equals* with Babeuf, the first revolution against the revolutionary state. The aims of this insurrection were notoriously expressed in his 1796 *Manifesto of Equals*, which called for the conjoined abolition of private property and the destruction of all the arts.

The revolutionary hour, the 10 days, the nose referencing the calendar’s inventor and the poster signalling the festivals of reason – all set the parameters for the action itself. As Michael Newman notes (2015, 29) they also inevitably raised questions about those very parameters. Which revolutionary time was being referenced? The festive time of the street, of a world

turned upside-down celebrated by the aforementioned poster? Or the rational time of the calendar, of decimal measure and division, which was instituted partly to stamp out such populist exuberance? And which Maréchal was referenced? The utopian young poet who invented a revolutionary calendar to reflect his egalitarian commitment? Or the revolutionary turned dissident, one of the first to criticize the contradictions of the revolutionary state? As the deliberately tendentious title makes clear, the action was conceived neither as a literal nor as a figural ‘re-enactment of the Revolution but as an exploration of a more general situation of inequality and revolt. *Before the Mast* refers to the living quarters of the crew, traditionally situated in the ship’s prow: ‘The crew being the largest number of men with the least status where mutineers might be found’ and ‘seeds of rebellion sown out of the intolerance of the imposition of inhuman disciplines meted out’ (personal communication, 4 Feb 2014).

As Brisley made clear on several occasions, the action referred to the reality of revolution by analogy only. A type of argument, analogy derives from the Greek *analogon* meaning proportion, correspondence or resemblance enabling reasoning on the basis of parallel cases. Although an argument by analogy does not require strict equivalence, each element of the parallel should normally add to the understanding of the other. Here the attempt was to create a situation resembling a totalizing, encompassing cataclysm (the defining features of revolution, according to Brisley) using the ‘full attributes of the human body’. In other words, the action served as a model through which to analyse the limitations of the revolutionary situation – in this instance the desire to begin anew and institute a durable experience of equality – through the limits of the human body. A model can be tested and, as Brisley notes, also repeated. It has an iterative structure that, at least in principle, can be extended beyond the frame of the performance itself.

The first limitation that Brisley set was to work with things already there, in the room, or contributed by participants. This restriction reflects the limiting aspect of all revolutions which, despite their claims to radical change, are constrained with working with what is already there, the habits and reflexes of the ‘collective mind’ as it were. The performance started by exploring key notions associated with the original meaning of the term ‘revolution’: as regeneration, a joint return to the balance and order associated with Classical past, as well as a natural time governed by the cyclical and astronomical rotations of the planets. The idea of balance and order was expressed vertically: the chairs, table and rubbish bin were suspended in various configurations which invariably collapsed. Circularity was explored through spinning motions and rapid turns of the table. Soon, however, these actions came to express their opposite. As the chairs and table legs broke and the rubbish bin cracked, the opportunity for balance and order was progressively eroded. The public became aware of a loss of form. With the tools for representation (the table, chairs, bins) dismantled, the capacity for purposeful activity was reduced. The artist too became increasingly lateral, crawling on his hands and knees, even rolling on the floor as there was less and less to construct with.

In a post-performance conversation Brisley identified the paradox of revolutionary time as ‘a continual breaking-down and fracturing that goes on’, a ‘falling into a state of rubbish’ even as ‘the actions actually imply something else’ (Brisley, Perovic, White 2013b). As time passed, a number of actions took place. The newspaper was read or torn up; the walls tapped for their resonance; the volume of the room measured. Sometimes the movements assumed the form of a *tableau vivant* – perhaps of an orator speaking, a figure giving benediction, a body separated from its head by a guillotine. Crucially, the idea of an original day one was also explored through sound. Actions were sometimes accompanied by humming, gurgling, retching, or a deep grumbling that began in the belly and struggled to reach the throat. Brisley explained that

these sounds articulated ‘a sort of prior condition to the use of language’, a language of communication that is ‘not a language of articulating ideas’.

Here we approach arguably the most radical aspect of Brisley’s relation to the historical past. Kalle Pihlainen notes that the metaphor of the past as a foreign language or country, is proverbial amongst historians. He argues that it is particularly misleading, as the past does not use language and does not speak, indeed does not constitute a coherent entity (2014, 577). Brisley’s use of sound suggests a similar incapacity to grasp what is unthinkable, uncontrollable – one is tempted to say ‘volcanic’ – in our relation to the past. Sound bleeds across any attempt at framing. Travelling beyond the circumscribed space, Brisley’s noises disturbed other unsuspecting visitors to the gallery, presumably even the neighbours downstairs. As he joked, it was tempting to see how far the desire for levelling hierarchy could go, seeping through the floorboards, disturbing the flat below, flattening out further in a bottomless pit...The result, as Brisley observes, was as if ‘the end of the work is the starting point of the revolutionary intention’ (Brisley, Perovic, White 2013b). As time went on the inability to create form without introducing something new in the situation meant that both artist and the viewing spectators arrived ‘at the point where the absolute nadir of emptiness’ lies.

To my mind, this increasing disintegration of form over time reveals four aspects of the revolutionary experience which enhance our understanding of the historical record. First it reinforces the recognition that the French Revolution – contrary perhaps to popular opinion – did not begin with the idea of a tabula rasa or zero-hour. As mentioned before, Year I was not instituted until 1793, four years after the transformative events of the French Revolution began. Maréchal’s *Manifesto of Equals*, arguably the most radical demand for a total rupture with the

past, was not written until 1796, under the Directory, when the Revolution's radical phase was supposed to be over. So the first insight is that the call for radical beginnings comes not at the historical origin of the process but at its end. It is as much a declaration as a reaction to an ongoing situation – namely, as we see here, the difficulty of sustaining the radical impulse for moral and political regeneration, and its implied claims for human equality.

The second insight was a heightened awareness of the radical disjunction between rupture and creation. In an important sense, any claim to rupture relies on what is already there, rearranging extant cultural forms and representations to reflect new experiences. Perhaps because we are so used to avant-garde associations of the tabula rasa with the creation of new forms and attitudes, we tend to assume that the impulse to rupture is inherently creative. But one reason why the revolutionaries expressed the idea of a tabula rasa in the form of a calendar is precisely because calendars too are always already there, one of the most time-resistant artefacts of human culture, bound by natural constraints. Refracting the failure of this endeavour, Brisley's performance suggests that rupture and creation are processes that rarely coincide in the revolutionary situation. First, it is difficult to create new forms without drawing on something from the past, thereby invalidating the postulate of a radical rupture. Secondly, for new forms to gain traction, to appear 'as something' they typically have to belong to - or function as - new institutions. Any re-institutionalization inevitably reproduces authoritative structures of some kind, leading away from the radical impulse to absolute equality.

The third insight is not conceptual but emotional. As Brisley and several of the spectators noted, the situation became more toxic as it wore on. This suggests interesting parallels with Brisley's earlier *And for today...Nothing*. There too the toxic was experienced as a kind of tipping point between form and formlessness. And there too, Brisley's attempt to endure the

toxic situation associated with death and the loss of form, offered a fresh perspective on a historical situation. In this case, the fate of the historical Marat, who, as we know, quickly tipped from being a hero, immortalized in statues which were to replace the statues of saints throughout France, to an abomination, a disembodied name to be uttered with disgust and preferably forgotten. Similarly, in *Before the Mast*, a desire for rupture that was first expressed energetically became increasingly malevolent. This parallels the experience of the revolutionary calendar which began as a startlingly confident symbol of the new Republic, supported by a broad spectrum of the elite, before being quietly dismantled in piecemeal fashion. Taken together, both performances underscore the toxic nature of any interregnum period. They provide ammunition for the idea, first formulated by Gramsci, that interregnum refers not just to a break in succession of monarchical rule – when existing laws are temporarily suspended –, but any period in which the ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’ (1971, 276; see also Bauman 2010, 120, quoted on Brisley’s website).

The fourth insight concerns the challenge of this formlessness to our customary ways of understanding artistic endeavour. Several times, Brisley stopped his performance before the allotted time was over to declare it a failure. But a failure of what? On one level, the several declarations of failure that punctuated *Before the Mast* can be read allegorically: that the revolutionary hour can never be reached. On another level, to allow the action to end ‘successfully’ would suggest that final statements are possible. Failure thus also refers to the difficulty of sustaining formlessness. To what extent can one endure the radical impulse towards a total rupture with the past? As Brisley added after one of his declarations of failure, ‘even in destruction there is always conservation’.

This is borne out by the historical experience of the Revolution in which along with destroying

various markers of the past, the revolutionaries also rushed to conserve it. The Louvre was instituted as a state museum partly as a reaction against the speed of rupture. It was officially declared open on 10 August 1793, the first anniversary of the monarch's abolition, also marked with the destruction of the royal tombs at St. Denis, a final attempt to wipe out the royalist past before Year I of a new time began. In other words, the Louvre was instituted in part to conserve as *historical*, symbols of a feudal and religious past considered by many to still be *alive*. Andrew McClellan notes that 'blatantly royalist images were kept in storage or destroyed, but a strict arrangement by school and chronology neutralized the spiritual content of religious icons by re-identifying them as masterpieces of art history' (2012, 245-6).

We are back full circle to the conventional opposition: dead history, live art. The French Revolution is commonly taken as the beginning of a modern understanding of the autonomous aesthetic value of art. As the arrangement of the Louvre makes clear, the development of a 'modern' understanding of aesthetic autonomy went hand in hand with a historicization of the artwork. Chronological time became the frame through which to evaluate both the autonomy of the artwork *and* its historical value. Brisley's performance in contrast invites us to consider the difficulty of carrying through any declaration of thoroughgoing rupture. True rupture, as Kazimir Malevich famously argued - and indeed Sylvain Maréchal before him - would require the courage to destroy for good all existing artworks knowing that new forms and works would eventually be created (see Groys 2008, 26). Incomplete rupture, by mobilizing both destruction and conservation, consolidates the opposition dead history, live art as one internal to (art) history. Boris Groys has suggested that when artists want to break out of the museum in order for their art to become 'truly real' they are in fact reproducing the logic of the museum archive. As Groys observes, cultures without museums need to constantly reproduce their past; cultures with museums need to

constantly produce new objects. The more ‘real’ ‘alive’ and ‘contemporary’ the artist can make her art appear, the more likely that it will be collected and become the future’s past (27).

Conclusion

This article began by suggesting that both performance art and the historical method are based on a core distinction between live events and their subsequent reconstruction through documentation. But while it is common to associate authenticity with the live event, I have argued instead for a view of historical authenticity as something that resonates across time, as given actions address new audiences who, in turn, reframe the original situation or context. If this is the case, then performance can indeed offer a critical perspective on the historical record. Brisley’s 10-day actions are a case in point. The historical method typically frames the record of past events in terms of linear, chronological time. Brisley’s 10-day performances, in contrast, offer analogy, model and *mise-en-abîme* as alternative ways of framing our relation to the historical past. Whereas history reconstructs the past after the fact, from a point of view exterior to the events themselves, Brisley’s actions offer a perspective from ‘inside’ the revolutionary situation, which includes the experience of duration and not just causality.

This allows the revolutionary situation to be analyzed and experienced in ‘lived time’, that is to say, a time jointly experienced by both the artist and the participants, rather than reconstructed according to a hypothetical, historical time which belongs to no-one. Within this timeframe, the *presence* of the historical referent disrupts what Allen Munslow terms the ‘conflation of the past with history’ (2014, 574) by revealing other unrealized presents of this past. This implies a minimal acknowledgement of the truth-value of the referent, not in the

sense that one could ever ‘know’ what went on in the minds of long-dead people, but in the sense of acknowledging a reality outside the frame of the performance. It also implies that authenticity is found not in the ‘originary’ event, but rather on the side of declaration and commitment, in this case to the unfinished ‘futures’ of revolutionary history rather than its past. Anything else would reproduce the false dichotomy between the ‘temporary’ and the ‘permanent’ which, for Brisley, remains fundamentally undemocratic.

Perhaps the best way to conclude, therefore, is with a non-conclusion. Since its performance, elements developed in *Before the Mast* have been included in new works. The soundwork *Workers of the World Unite*, performed in the persona of R Y Sirb, the acting director and curator of the Museum of Ordure, took place on February 19 2014 at Kunsthal Aarhus. It accompanied the launch of a new book presenting over 100 covers of the *Communist Manifesto* in multiple languages published by the virtual museum. Dressed in black and wearing the same prosthetic nose, Brisley held a measuring stick to his throat, producing gagging and choking sounds until he finally gasped out the slogan ‘workers of the world unite, unite!’ Here too the performance invites us to reflect on the futures of the revolutionary past, by reframing a real, nowadays mostly dismissed, historical referent – the numerous translations and editions of the Communist manifesto published around the world.

My final example is *Breath*, performed at the Royal Academy Life Room on October 29, 2014, during which a film based on *Before the Mast* was projected. As Michael Newman notes, the Life-drawing Room dates from the eighteenth century, founded under a monarchy that opposed the French Revolution. Inserting *Before the Mast* into this sovereign space reframes it in terms of a new context – that of an incomplete Revolution. Following Brisley’s habitual practice, the performance relied heavily on found objects: the human skeleton and the écorché horse in

particular. It also utilized a mirror to reflect back to the public its own living image, in a kind of mise-en-abîme [see figure 6]. The living public became the subject of the action, reoccupying the position of the sovereign gaze, the monarch for whom all art is made, who breathes 'life' into dead art, so to speak. This time, however, the action did not end with Brisley's customary declaration of failure. Instead, on the way out, as we stepped over the threshold of the Life room and into our individual lives, each member of the public was handed a scroll of the *Manifesto of Equals*. Once again a historical referent was used to reframe an ending as a question of beginnings. What would it mean to enter a day one of the revolutionary period and when would it begin?

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FIGURES

Figure 1. And for Today...Nothing.1972. Gallery House, Goethe Institution, London. Photograph the Artist.

Figure 2. Before the Mast. 2013. Domobaal Gallery, London. Photograph Maya Balcioglu.

Figure 3. Before the Mast. 2013. Domobaal Gallery, London. Photograph Maya Balcioglu.

Figure 4. Before the Mast. 2013. Domobaal Gallery, London. Photograph Maya Balcioglu.

Figure 5. Pierre-Sylvain Maréchal (1750-1803).

Figure 6. Breath. 2014. The Life Room at the Royal Academy Schools. Photograph Maya Balcioğlu.

FIGURES



Figure 1. And for Today...Nothing. 1972. Gallery House, Goethe Institute, London.



Figure 2. Before the Mast. © Maya Balcioglu.



Figure 3. Before the Mast. © Maya Balcioglu.



Figure 4. Before the Mast. © Maya Balcioglu.

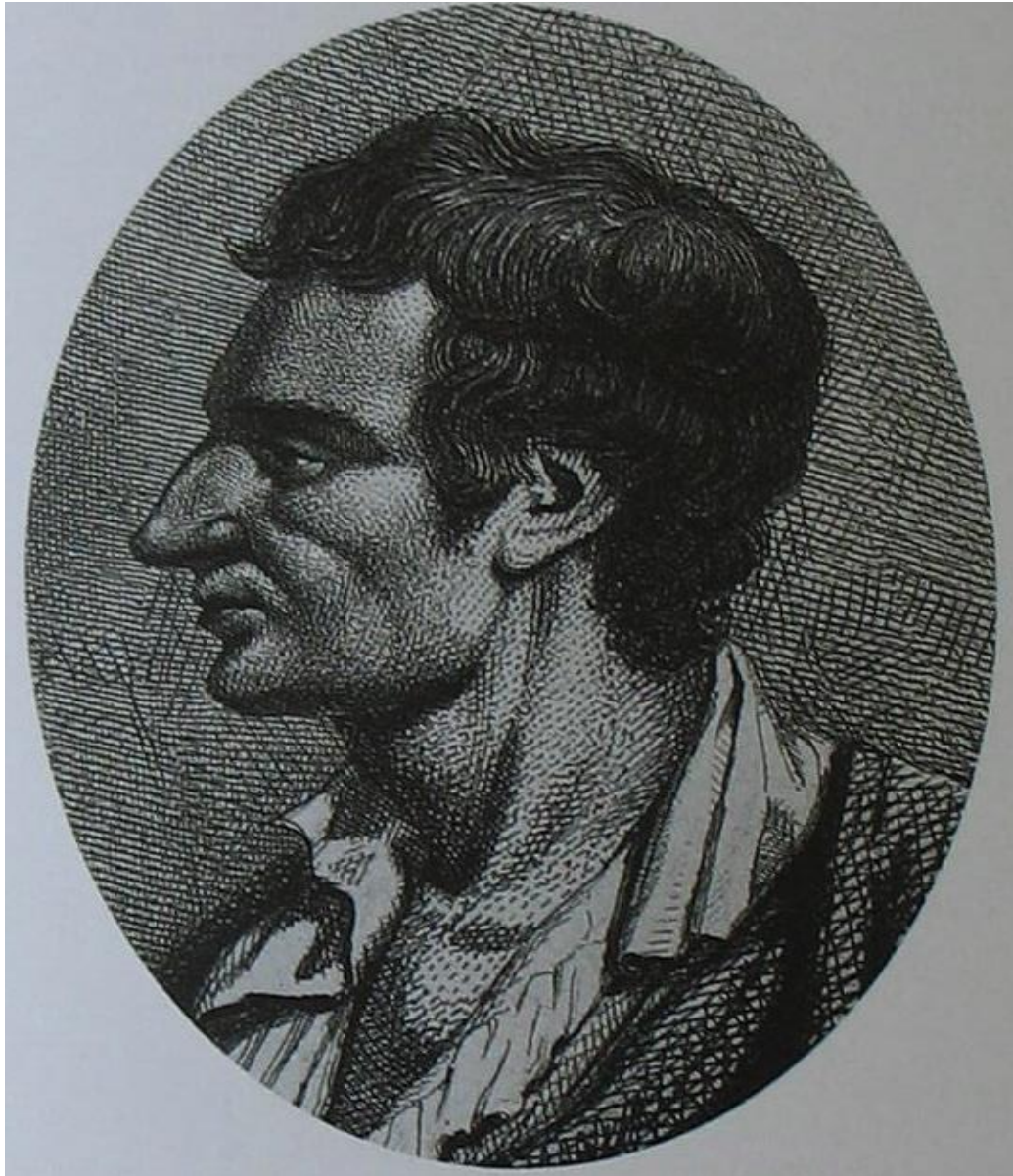


Figure 5. Pierre-Sylvain Maréchal. (1750-1803).



Figure 6. Breath. © Maya Balcioglu.