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Working with fragments: A performance art's archive

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates the potential of the disparate and unconventional aspects of what can be considered an archive, as a means by which to respond to a past performance. According to French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, commentary on artworks seeks to link onto the gesture or trace of the event and to provoke further artworks as commentary. It is this affective response to fragments from a past performance that motivates this project. In 2013–2014, I worked with students from two art institutions, one in Poland and one in the United Kingdom, to respond to a performance by British artist Stuart Brisley, which took place in Warsaw in 1975. Photographs from the performance are readily accessible online, but there remains no archival record of the performance at the event's location. It was, therefore, to investigate this performance by other means that students were asked to work with fragments from the past.

Standing in front of Warsaw's imposing Palace of Culture and Science, framed by a brilliant blue sky, passers-by are shown photocopied images from a performance that took place inside nearly 40 years before. The edited responses in the resulting video are varied: intrigued, insightful, dismissive; we are not shown the images and have to imagine what they might be (Figure 1). The process of working from archival material is similar – piecing together glimpses and projecting into the gaps. The focus of this article is, however, not the use of conventional archive material; rather, it is a rewriting that draws attention to the potential of the disparate and unconventional aspects of what can be considered an archive, including a search for that which is not physically present. I intend to track my own search for the remains of a performance, creating an affective archive, augmented by the students with whom I worked and by the process of writing, drawing and performance which has driven the research.

I, first, knowingly saw an image of *Moments of Decision/Indecision* projected during a talk given by the British artist Stuart Brisley at Leeds City Art Gallery in 2006. Huge, black and white – an upturned figure drenched in paint, struggling against its background. The image stayed with me. When I was asked to visit Warsaw on a teaching exchange to the Academy of Fine Arts in 2013, it was this image that came back: an image of a performance made in 1975 by Brisley in a Warsaw that was then the capital of the People's Republic of Poland.

Poland, 2013, almost 40 years later and (in some ways) a different country. I wanted, somehow, to take this performance back. Of course, the performance was not mine to take, only my experience of the images – by now they had multiplied beyond that first image and had begun to blur. There is no single, definitive image of this performance and the experience it evokes is never static. By necessity it was a short project with many unknowns: the students with whom I was working were 'grafik' students (a particularly Polish tradition which lacks a clear equivalent in the United Kingdom), and the Professor in whose studio I was working, Wojciech Tylbor-Kubrakiewicz, was unsure how they would react to such an open brief, responding only to ideas and images from a performance by a British artist, made in Poland, in 1975. However, in their response to the performance *Moments of Decision/Indecision* they immediately seemed to validate the project. Each made a decision to participate, or not.

Brisley's performance had taken place close by the Art Academy in one part of the most visually dominant buildings in Warsaw – The Palace of Culture and Science – a site of many cultural and political events, yet one student commented: 'I can't believe that this happened just over there and we know nothing about it'. Visiting the Palace of Culture, a huge Stalinist skyscraper, allowed me to place Brisley's piece in a context which I had not fully appreciated. I had read the named location 'Teatr Studio Galerie, Pałace i Nauki' many times, but to visit the building gave another layer of meaning or imagined presence to my reimagining of the piece. Outside the Palace, close to the steps of the theatre and gallery, the location of the wall of the Warsaw Ghetto is inscribed into

Figure 1(a–d): Karolina Ciepielewska and Kaja Marzec, Responses to Moments of Decision/Indecision*, Video, 2m 35, 2013.*

the paved surface: another reminder of the histories to which the location attests and to which the performance by Brisley indirectly refers. Given that this is a geopolitical location already soaked to saturation with historical and political references, why should the students be aware of this particular performance event? They shouldn't – there was no deterministic pedagogical agenda at work on my part – yet there was something genuine about that student's incredulity, about the fact that this particular history had remained hidden from her.

According to the archivist I contacted at the Palace of Culture, there is no record of the performance in the archive of the theatre or of the gallery. We are largely reliant on Brisley's own online archive for documents relating to the event, including a scanned copy of the letter of invitation from the then Director of the Teatr Studio, Józef Szajna. An important figure in the cultural life of Poland throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Szajna is best known for his set design, theatre direction and artistic work, which often drew on his experiences as a prisoner in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. It was because Brisley had read a review of Szajna's work at the Edinburgh Festival that he was motivated to contact him whilst undertaking a residency in West Berlin in 1973–1974. The resulting visit to Warsaw was a politically delicate undertaking, one which Brisley acknowledges was the result of youthful naivety, as told in both his loosely autobiographical novel *Beyond Reason: Ordure* (2003) and the lengthy interviews made for the British Library (1996).

The decision to travel outside West Berlin and into the Eastern Block was one that transgressed the cultural intentions of the D.A.A.D. (German Academic Exchange) programme. This transgression was exacerbated by the subsequent public performance the following year in Warsaw, the capital of a country regarded by the West as a satellite of the Soviet Union. Consequently, Brisley's foray into a land which had held a personal fascination dating back to childhood prompted a potential diplomatic incident. It might seem clear to us now that the set-up of the performance, in which Brisley 'attempted to climb up the wall at the end of the room without aid' (2012), was a visual comment on the wall that divided Europe, but it was the explicitly experimental nature of Brisley's performance that seems to have disturbed the British diplomatic service.

The first day of the performance was used by the Polish authorities as a public relations coup in order to demonstrate to foreign dignitaries, including the British ambassador, their open attitude to such work. A short article in *Studio International* relays the embarrassment caused by the situation: finding he could not condemn the work – for fear of being regarded as censorial and against the free expression on which the West prided itself – the ambassador was perplexed. Not being properly briefed on how to react to the spectacle of a naked British citizen, writhing about in copious amounts of black and white paint, '[t]he ambassador wrote a long and detailed letter of protest apparently to the British Council in London (who were simply responsible for the travel costs)' (Chaimowicz 1976: 66). Little of the political context's complexity is apparent in the ways in which

the performance is now relayed in the conventional annals of art history. The affects of shame, embarrassment, awkwardness and unease must become part of this rewriting of the archive and the retelling of the story of *Moments of Decision/Indecision*.

When introducing the performance to students in Warsaw I deliberately omitted to mention any of the political references implicit in its set-up. It was not my place to lecture them on the history of the city: it surrounds them every day, just below the surface of the grandiose facades of the rebuilt classical palaces which line the street – Krakowskie Przedmieście – where the Art Academy is located. I was reminded very quickly, however, that all the students with whom I worked were born after the 'transition' and the end of the communist state. In contrast, when introducing the project to students in the art school at Leeds Metropolitan University (now Leeds Beckett University), I did include an image of Warsaw taken in 1945, showing the destruction of 85 per cent of the city, told of the ghettoization of the Jewish population and their deportation, and the uprisings of 1944. This was given as an introduction to Warsaw, not the performance, and I was relieved that their initial verbal response to the images of the performance included not only words associated with struggle but also a comment on their beauty.

The images are beautiful, perhaps thanks to the aesthetic commonly associated with black and white photographic prints – the convention of the art print as a seductive surface, almost in spite of the subject it shows. The eighteen photographs owned by the Tate gallery can be viewed on their website in what appears to be a comprehensive documentation of the event. Seen in sequence, the images appear as a time-lapse animation: the figure of the artist rises and falls, twists and turns, smears and slides in the black paint, white paint, copious amounts of which cover the artist, the floor and the wall. On reading that the performance took place over a series of days it is possible to identify unifying phrases within the series of images. Six photographs share a backdrop almost entirely obliterated by black, against which Brisley's athletic body kicks in a handstand, then falls to the floor, his back covered in rivulets of white paint, running over black. Another six are lighter in tone, the presence of a bucket of white paint in the foreground making it clear why; the artist is using his whole body to smear the wall white, arms reaching, legs wheeling. In another, the body lies exhausted, crouching as though to protect itself from an increasingly domineering background, which seeks to envelop the figure.

But then the viewer becomes confused: similar poses, different backgrounds – there is some sense of a loop, of differentiated repetition. I click through these images, projected in the studio in Warsaw, and it does not matter that they represent tiny slices of the six days during which Brisley performed, for three hours a day. The images carry a greater sense of time – through the evident build up of paint – but also through the oddness of the artist's endeavour and the description that accompanies the work: the artist is blinded by the paint, closes his eyes and relies on the

photographer to guide him. I ask the students to work in pairs and this theme of collaboration, of guiding, is apparent in many of the visual responses, coupled with the theme of blindness and the ensuing need for trust.

In Brisley's comments on the photographs of the performance, writing in 2012, he notes that 'some of the resulting photographic images have become art works in their own right' (2012). Whilst Brisley does not elaborate on this process, it may be reasonable, at first, to surmise that their exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 1981 and subsequent acquisition by the Tate has been part of this process. But that would perhaps be too easy an interpretation. Given Brisley's own disdain for unquestioned forms of institution, the monarchy being a frequent target as seen in the 2014 exhibition 'State of Denmark', it is more useful to think about how these photographs have begun to operate as works of art, not in the sense of commodified objects that circulate uncritically within the established art world and market, but as works that have the capacity to make us think. It is more interesting, then, to ask how these photographs operate as a means to open up the performance and activate that which is not directly represented. This question of how artworks can open us up to thought and overturn our established presuppositions with regard to thought itself, taxed French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. It is a question that is particularly evident in one of Lyotard's last extensive works on an individual artist – *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour* – which addresses more generally what it is, or can be, to respond to a work of art. *Karel Appel* is evidence of the philosopher's struggle to do justice to the gestures that call to him, without reducing them to the prescribed formulations of aesthetics or the history of art:

> *Cela seul, qu'il y ait ce geste, qu'il soit là, constitue l'impénétrabilité de l'œuvre à la pensée. Or, c'est à la mesure de cette énigme que l'artiste qui appelle le philosophe lui ordonne de mettre et de démettre sa pensée.*
>
> This alone, that there is this gesture, that it is there, constitutes the impenetrability of the work to thought. Yet it is by the measure of this enigma that the artist who calls the philosopher orders him to locate and dislocate his thought.
>
> (2009: 40–41)

At the end of my presentation to students in Warsaw I included the above quotation, reading it both in English and French, in order to indicate my own research interests but also with the vague, though misguided, idea that a choice of language might make it more accessible. What did occur, however, was an unexpected breakdown in linguistic communication on my part: the group was already translating and discussing my proposed brief among themselves in Polish and I knew the complexity of this phrase in English could not be easily explained. My audibly unconfident

utterance of the phrase in French, however, seemed to echo somehow differently. For me, at least, there was a verbal resonance to these statements in English and French that unsettled the directions I had been giving. It was not the first time I have used the quotation in a presentation and yet the implications of its challenge were heightened because I felt no compulsion to explain either the context or its possible meaning. Instead, it hung in the air, picked up most literally by students who talked of gesture (*geste* – is recognizably similar in Polish) in literal terms, with reference to Jackson Pollock, or who took it as a cue to explore physical gestures in drawing (blindfolded and guided by a partner). In the students' final presentation of work, however, I came to realize that for some the idea of 'geste' began to resonate more conceptually, as an act of encounter: responding to Brisley's performance as an act somehow out of time.

The idea of Brisley's work being 'out of time' confirms my desire that *Moments of Decision/Indecision* should not be neatly packaged for easy telling, but that its complexity should be maintained as part of the 'dislocation' to which Lyotard refers. Rewriting the archive should dislocate thought, not once, but again and again as an ongoing process, a continual working over that refuses to allow ossification. The Tate's collection of the work is too neat a presentation: the prosaic catalogue entry written following its purchase in 1981, describes how the photographs were planned in advance and made as short sequences – the looped phases I had read as daily explorations are explained simply: 'He began with black paint, then used white and reverted to black again' (Tate Gallery 1984). The photographs are shown mounted in grey surrounds and thereby have lost some of their immediacy. On Brisley's website there are fewer images but each can be enlarged, and, free from a surround, they come a little closer to the viewer with greater contrast and resolution. The incompleteness of Brisley's selection prompts a shuttling back and forth between different sites, leading me to identify that four of the six images are not in the Tate collection.

There is something satisfying about the realization that the Tate's collection is not a definitive set. Additional images are found unexpectedly: the three photographs reproduced here (see Figure 2) do not belong to the Tate, but were shown at London gallery Mummery+Schnelle in 2013, and one of the most intriguing images from *Moments of Decision/Indecision* appears on the cover of *Art in Theatre*, edited by Nick Kaye in 1996. In this photograph the artist's body has almost lost its identity as a discernible human form, twisted in on itself and seemingly in the process of being reduced to the same matter as the paint which is smeared and splattered against the wall, splattered on the floor. I use this image as part of an ongoing series of drawings I am making that show all the available sources of the performance in print (Figure 3). These are drawn from photocopies because the process lends an oddness to the photographs. The contrast is increased and compositions are altered by the skewed perspective – seen somewhat obliquely as they lie, arranged haphazardly, on my studio desk. I tell myself that this laborious process of drawing these

Figure 2: Stuart Brisley, Moments of Decision/Indecision*, 1975, photographs by Leslie Haslam (copyright of the artist).*

Figure 3: Kiff Bamford, Decision/Decyzja after Brisley*, Pencil on Paper, 2014.*

photographic fragments from past performances forces me to spend time with the images and to think about them differently. The drawing is a form of commentary, one which conforms to Lyotard's description in *Karel Appel*:

> Let us call commentary on art any text, any trace of a gesture of and in language, that *links on or with a* 'work of art' regardless of its distinctive matter, language, colour, closed or open volume, music, heavy mute body in dance, speaking body in theatre, etc. […]
>
> (2009: 33, original emphasis)

Commentary is not that which seeks to explain an account of events, seeks to piece together fragments from an archive, but one which links onto the trace of the gesture. According to Lyotard, the challenge presented by the gesture of the work is that the gesture is an occurrence which reorders space–time. Gesture refuses any reduction to comprehensible forms of understanding.

How then to do justice to this singularity? Lyotard suggests that commentary must become work itself, one that is concerned with matter: not contextualization, historicization or predetermined comprehensible forms. Contrary to what I have suggested above, it is not simply the complexity of the political context of Brisley's performance which is missing in its art historical retelling. Neither is it the absence of the feelings of shame, unease and repulsion that circulate around its awkward reception. What is neglected is the radical affectivity of the performance, an affect that is not a synonym for categories of emotion but, rather, that which evades attempts to reduce it to fixed categories for easy decoding and discussion. Lyotard's conception of affect, like gesture, works through an inability to be rendered comprehensible, through the presence of a feeling which cannot be put into words. That which I am terming an affective archive cannot be motivated by the fallacious notion of a recreated whole: 'At this instant of *gesture*, the unknown storms, and the body breaks apart. – Then one practices commentary, commencing' (Lyotard 2009: 221, original emphasis). The body is broken by that which the archive has been unable to contain. Against a brilliant blue sky the passers-by laugh at their own observations, reflecting seriously on the struggle of the photocopied figure or simply dismiss the whole: 'disgusting' (see Figure 1).

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