

# Delegating (community) action: Stuart Brisley's Peterlee Project

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In the first half of the 1970s, the Artist Placement Group<sup>1</sup> (APG, 1966-1979) applied to several New Towns in order to arrange the scheme through which artists could be placed in the town.<sup>2</sup> Like other APG placements in industrial or governmental organizations, this application rested on the idea that an artist could have a positive effect on a town and its people. The only response came from the Peterlee Development Corporation (PDC), and in 1975, Stuart Brisley (Surrey, 1933) was placed in Peterlee. After a month of feasibility research around the town, Brisley went back to the corporation and told them that it was 'absolutely useless' to make artworks for his placement. He had concluded that any presumed aesthetic value attached to an artwork would fail to benefit people living in Peterlee.<sup>3</sup>

Now widely regarded as a key figure of performance art in Britain, Stuart Brisley's career spans over 60 years of painting, sculpture, sui generis installations, community projects, films, and teaching. Gaining notoriety in the 1960s and 1970s with his physically disturbing performances, Brisley sought to engender a democratic basis for the relationship between the artist and his audience—'without the intermediary classifications of high-culture and professionalism'<sup>4</sup> in the words of John Roberts. Moreover, he was one of the key figures in the 1968 Hornsey Sit-in protesting teaching practices in British art schools, and one of the founders of the Artists Union (1972-1983). Indeed, by the time his placement began in Peterlee, Brisley had already established a reputation as an artist who questioned the British class system, challenged cultural norms, state power and the body politic,

Near Sunderland in the North East of England, the New Town of Peterlee had been envisaged in 1948 by the post-war Labour Government with its commitment to major reforms that would pave the way to a system of peacetime planning, Nationalisation and the Welfare State. And, this was a time when mining was still vital for the British industry: 'Miners are the salt of the earth' saluted Lewis Silkin, the Minister of Town and Country Planning in 1948. Peterlee had been conceived by the local council of Easington following the New Towns Act of 1946 that aimed to alleviate the housing shortage and contribute to the post-war reconstruction efforts.<sup>5</sup> Conception of Peterlee was in response to the need for a center for the various villages that had been built around the pits that were sunk in the early 1900s.<sup>6</sup> In 1975, Peterlee was still a one-dimensional industrial area with 80% of the male population working in



Fig. 1 Artist Project Peterlee / History Within Living Memory 1976-77 © Stuart Brisley & © Durham County Record Office Tate Archive TGA 201114/4/1



Fig. 2 Artist Project Peterlee / History Within Living Memory 1976-77 Photo: Stuart Brisley © Stuart Brisley

coal mining. Furthermore, this was a somewhat diasporic community: 70% of the population had come from the surrounding villages and even as far as from Scotland and Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Not unlike migrant workers, most of the residents had moved to Peterlee because their houses were tied to their employers.

What baffled Brisley was the lack of the sense of history in the town. He reckoned that this missing history was encapsulated in the 'the bodies and heads of the people living in Peterlee'.<sup>8</sup> And, the revelation of this history, extracted, as it were, from the personal and collective memories of residents became the first part of *The Peterlee Project*. Entitled *History Within Living Memory*, this initial part involved the collection of private memories of Peterlee residents. It was essentially a people's history: a reflection of the Marxist idea that in order to study the present one needs to understand the past.<sup>9</sup> Utilising an anthropological approach, this stage of the project was influenced by the work of the Hackney Writers Group and other similar groups at the time, as well as the earlier Mass Observation.<sup>10</sup> Through the collection and collation of this history, Brisley would assist and instigate the composition of the history of the present for people of Peterlee as well as the town's short past; how the area was industrialized through the pits towards the coast and finally in Peterlee. *History Within Living Memory* would be followed by two subsequent stages that sought to enable individuals to build their own community: collection of historical material through public engagement, and an open-ended workshop that would continue even after Brisley's placement ended. Potentially continuous, this final stage was replicable in other towns, even without the presence of Brisley. As it will be explicated below, this final stage was crucial, and it deemed the project an 'extended performance' for Brisley.

Now located at the Tate Britain, the Peterlee Project Archive encompasses material collected during the project's first stage: 2000 photographs and 50 taped interviews that shifted private memory into shared history. However, this archive is neither representative nor adequate to illustrate Brisley's intentions with the project. Initially conceived as a continuous process of assembling views, memories and visual material, the project was not intended as an archive of Peterlee history. Instead, it was a radical experiment predicated on constant learning and participation. It was an experiment that would transform into a social tool with which the community of Peterlee would come together, interact and discuss issues pertaining to the town and beyond. Essentially, as an extended performance, *The Peterlee Project* was Brisley's attempt to transcend the transience and ephemerality associated with performance. It was also a way of carrying performance into the social field by restructuring the relationship between an artist and his audience on democratic grounds, and ultimately a refusal to let the project become dormant by attaining the status of an archive. Thus, in a way, Brisley desisted the archival logic of modernity that values document over event according to Rebecca Schneider.<sup>11</sup> As I will delineate below, Brisley's was also an effort to value memory—by reconnecting it to the present and the future of Peterlee—over the governing mode of the archive<sup>12</sup> or the immutability of heritage,



Fig. 3 Artist Project Peterlee / History Within Living Memory 1976-77 © Stuart Brisley & © Durham County Record Office Tate Archive TGA 201114/4/1



Fig. 4 Artist Project Peterlee / History Within Living Memory 1976-77 © Stuart Brisley & © Durham County Record Office Tate Archive TGA 201114/4/1

because rather than disappearing as expected by the archive (according to Schneider); performance would instead shift into the social. After all, the project was intrinsically connected to Brisley's artistic oeuvre through which he continues to investigate the boundaries of performance, his body and social dynamics since the 1960s.

In his initial project proposal to the PDC in 1975, Brisley asserted that his purpose was 'to find the means through which to work towards a situation in which all people in Peterlee have a further opportunity to develop their own awareness of and participation in the evolution of the community'.<sup>13</sup> His aim was to empower individuals to build their own community, and he emphasized the importance of the conscious and active participation of individuals in this process. Therefore, he defined his role as a consultant rather than a leader or manager. This was in accordance with the tiered and open structure of the project, and his intention 'to erode the sense of isolation and social introversion and to attempt to collectivize specific experience'.<sup>14</sup> This decision is also crucial for understanding the scope of the project as well as its social dimension within the context of 1970s Britain. Stemming from the Latin *consultare* (to discuss), a consultant is 'a person qualified to give professional advice or services, e.g. in problems of management or design; an adviser'<sup>15</sup>. Consultancy, especially when it is external, involves the utilisation of the expertise of one person for the solution of a specific issue and/or problem. As such, Brisley's decision to define his involvement as a consultant can be interpreted as the disillusionment with the modernist programme, the inadequacy of the British welfare state and the well-intentioned New Towns Act of 1946 that failed to provide solutions to the housing and social problems of cities.

The involvement of local people in *The Peterlee Project* was imperative for Brisley both due to his underlying socialist motivation for collaborative work, and because a sense of solidarity was necessary for the project to sustain itself as a social tool. Essentially adopting a Gramscian approach by emphasizing the necessity of democratic participation and its importance for the working class to actually coordinate struggle to form organizations towards the type of just and truly equal society, Brisley believed that people have an inherent critical ability to think about, and change their world.<sup>16</sup> He wrote: 'the terms of such an opportunity should be common, to the extent that people have access through it, and can begin to articulate their needs, and expectation within the context of community'.<sup>17</sup> The project was a social process, and a live proposal linked to 'the passage of history, and a tool for consciousness'.<sup>18</sup>

As a continuous social process, the project was to have three stages:

1. *History Within Living Memory*: The purpose of this stage was 'to create the means whereby people may be afforded the opportunity to contribute to a people's history of the New Town of Peterlee, (...) to encourage the development of an historical consciousness in the area, as a necessary pre-requisite for an understanding of the circumstances and actions in the present and action in the future'.<sup>19</sup> The outcome of this stage would



Fig. 5 Artist Project Peterlee / History Within Living Memory 1976-77 Photo: Stuart Brisley © Stuart Brisley.

- include taped interviews i.e. oral history, and personal mementos such as photographs.
2. Historical Material Collection and Public Engagement: This second stage of the project involved the collection and collation of historical materials relevant to the area, such as studies made in the area before and after the development of the New Town, proposals made by the local government and history of women in the area. This stage also included the development of the conditions and means through which the accumulated materials would be made available to the public. The material collated at this stage included commissioned research papers on the history of the Peterlee Development Corporation, women in the area as well as proposals for the third stage.
  3. Workshop as a 'Social Tool': This final stage of the project was to assume the form of an open workshop 'to be concerned with a full history of the area, and with the fully developed use of the workshop as a "social tool"<sup>20</sup>. Community interests, the continued development of historical awareness as well as issues and proposals for actions would be at the heart of this final stage which would essentially bring to mind town hall meetings without town officials, namely a platform for debate where members of the community would socialise and discuss issues of interest regarding Peterlee and beyond.<sup>21</sup>

The first stage was developed as a preparatory phase, which targeted orientation of the six initial participants, their familiarization with the community building process through material collection. As a consultant, Brisley would relay his expertise to the participants, who were then to act as ambassadors for the project. The essence of the project rested in the second and third stages, wherein these ambassadors would adopt a leaderless and horizontal approach to community building through open discussion.

The integration of the project into the community was an open and gradual process that involved discussion and revision 'to enable people with widely differing experience, and understanding to participate'.<sup>22</sup> However, after the first few months, it became obvious that there was a distinct division between the views, interests and behaviour of the six participants, which resulted in a serious breakdown. This breakdown was not due to class barriers; all of the participants came from working-class backgrounds. Instead, the problems arose because of the heterogeneity of intra-class identities: the participants who had not received higher education—John Porter, a disabled ex-miner in particular—predicated their identity on the industrial experience of mining. These participants were unable and unwilling to accept the notion of choice given to other participants and ultimately the rest of the community because they sought to dominate and order the project in terms of their own experience of work, which was specific to industrial conditions. Seeking a concrete hierarchical structure within the group, these members rejected the proposed horizontal configuration in which independent personal responsibility applied to everyone.<sup>23</sup>

Brisley recounted that 'since there was no easily detected hierarchy in the project, there were continual attempts to set

up rigid bureaucratic procedures which were antipathetic to the proposed openly structured workshop'.<sup>24</sup> This need for hierarchy and the designation of an identifiable authority was cause for anxiety for the participants who had not received higher education. The obvious authority was thought to be the PDC, which they considered to be the employers. As a whole, Brisley inferred that the project was a clear reflection of the society, 'over-ridden and camouflaged by a common political debility, fostered by the fact that political power in Peterlee has been held by the Development Corporation over and above the people' since 1948'.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, by April 1977, it became clear that the PDC and Durham County authorities had different plans for the project. Although, Brisley proposed that leadership of the project be transferred to the local authorities during the third stage, PDC met with the local authorities without inviting Brisley, and ordered the transfer of all of the materials collected in the second stage of the project from the PDC to the Easington District Council (EDC).<sup>26</sup> In turn, the EDC appointed John Porter, the disabled ex-miner as the person in charge, and renamed the project *People Past and Present (Area of Easington)*.<sup>27</sup> Essentially, the council was interested in the project as a heritage rather than a social tool that could be sustained. As a result, they decided to preserve the audio-visual materials and eliminate the rest.<sup>28</sup> The destroyed material included:

4. History of the Peterlee Development Corporation by F. Robinson, Rowntree Trust, University of Durham, commissioned by the project, 1977;
5. Comparative Studies in New Town Planning by Gary Armen;
6. History of Women in the Area by Pat Gallagher, commissioned by the project, 1977;
7. A critical examination of Artist Project Peterlee and two other statements by David Brown;
8. Concept, structures, history and proposals for an open workshop in the Easington District;
9. Statement by the Free University.<sup>29</sup>

The loss of these documents also meant the destruction of the whole concept of the project for Brisley. Effectively, this act nullified Brisley's 18-month long effort towards the establishment of an open workshop in Peterlee. It is still unclear whether this destruction was a retaliation effort on the part of the Council, which was inimical (until the early 1970s) to the PDC primarily due to lack of representation from the Council and the PDC's failure to keep them informed.<sup>30</sup>

The Council's decision to specifically destroy documents that involved intellectual effort while preserving the representational material including photographs, taped interviews, project proposals was in itself an acrimonious counter-political act that undermined Brisley's intentions and his interpretation of the project as a social tool. Whether this destruction was due to malfeasance or irascibility of the Council or the PDC was irrelevant. Brisley's role as a consultant was a 'recasting of the centrality of the artist as a silent manager'<sup>31</sup> (to use Miwon Kwon's terms) more so than an illustration of the Barthesian 'death of the author'<sup>32</sup> by the very choice of empowering collaborators while taking the



Fig. 6 Members of the Peterlee Development Corporation, Artist Project Peterlee / History Within Living Memory 1976-77.



back seat as a consultant. As such, the termination of the project and Brisley's placement following the destruction of material were indicative of the incontrovertible authorial presence and authority of the (avant-garde) artist. In other words, once Brisley was out of the equation, the project ceased to exist as a project—instead becoming a failed attempt. Although Brisley's function as a consultant was temporary, he was the one who designated the terms of this temporality: all responsibility would be transferred to the participants and the local government following the third stage. When these terms were not met and bureaucracy interfered with the open structure intended for the process, the essence of the project as a model (that could be replicated elsewhere) was lost. Since the open structure of the project was not 'an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation' in Umberto Eco's terms, it would always remain what Brisley had intended even though it concurrently offer the 'possibility of numerous different personal interventions'.<sup>33</sup>

## Extended Performance

It was a calculated decision on Brisley's part to propose a social tool for his placement because he felt a materialized art work/object would not have any effect on the Peterlee residents' cultural and/or social welfare. On the contrary, and perhaps not unlike social movements that aimed for moral transformations such as feminism, gay rights or abolitionism—albeit on a much smaller scale—*The Peterlee Project* aimed for social transformation in the mining town of Peterlee. Yet, this did not mean that the project was driven by envisaged outcomes that are associated with socially engaged art practice today. Since Brisley specifically chose not to frame the direction of the project, the course that the project would take essentially rested on the community's response to it. As such, the project can be studied among open works in Umberto Eco's terms; works that 'appeal to the initiative of the individual performer [participants] and hence they offer themselves not as finite works which prescribe specific repetition along given structural coordinates'.<sup>34</sup> Since the form Brisley devised for the project was community action, theoretically, the project offered infinite possibilities without impairing Brisley's 'original essence'. Furthermore, by not restraining the directions the project would take—hence deeming it inexhaustible—Brisley was questioning the dogmatic, industrial ways of working with rigid hierarchies.

Eco claims that Brecht's plays are similar to debates where, 'a solution is seen as desirable and is actually anticipated, but it must come from the collective enterprise of the audience. In this case the 'openness' is converted into an instrument of revolutionary pedagogics.'<sup>35</sup> This claim is applicable to *The Peterlee Project*: the openness of the project rested on the communicability of the participants as well as their ability and willingness to collaborate. In fact, *The Peterlee Project* took this one step further when Brisley required and sanctioned the collaboration of the participants—and ultimately the whole community—who would no longer be consumers, but active (mentally and theoretically) collaborators in the project's unfolding. The

scope of Brisley's role as a consultant was set to diminish gradually, which effectively meant that initiative, autonomy and the responsibility of extending the performance was delegated to the participants and ultimately to the whole community. All in all, *The Peterlee Project* should be considered an extension of performance that demonstrated the possibility of direct democracy—or democracy in its ancient Greek sense—'rule of the people' from *dêmos* (people) and *krátos* (power or rule)—which '[refers] to communal self-governance through popular assemblies such as the Athenian agora'.<sup>36</sup> Essentially, the content of the project was social and perhaps fostered with a constructivist ethos, but it was equally informed by Brisley's radical aesthetics: the project was an experiment for creating the conditions for a free society based on egalitarian principles and relations.

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Sanja Perovic's investigation of *The Peterlee Project* leads her to consider its qualities as an archive. She posits that Brisley's attempt to 'perform history'—and I would add, to raise awareness of this history as a tool for generating dialogue in the community for the town's present and its future—secures his position as a pioneer of the now pervasive archival art projects. Perovic locates the archival impulse of (contemporary) art within the many forms of performance history, along with the rising popularity of historical re-enactment, and exhibitions that juxtapose art and history. For Perovic, this double mirroring that she defines as the 'historical turn' in art and the 'performative turn' in historical inquiry is part of the 'rapprochement' of two antithetical fields (performance and history). In fact, she aptly posits that the extent of interest in the so-called historical past for performance is simply 'an empathetic, immersive reactivation of the past as present'.<sup>37</sup> The defining aspects of this 'reactivation', however, is neither history nor the past, but instead notions such as 'immediacy', 'immersion', 'experience', 'presence', 'action', and 'interaction'.<sup>38</sup> Increasingly, this has become a reactivation of the space through which all efforts are geared towards closing the gap between the artist and the audience. As such, the artist assumes the role of a 'creator of situations' in which the audience participates in, instead of a producer of something to be seen or beheld. However, such an understanding of performance and a conflation of performance art with so-called 'participatory art' fail to distinguish the artist from a mere provocateur, which brings forth the difficult task of defining performance art as a particular form or method of art practice like painting, drawing, miniature and so on. While it is not my intention here to propose a (re)definition of performance art, it is of utmost importance to touch upon the conflicting accounts of what defines performance art or its boundaries, because these can elucidate Brisley's intentions in extending performance to the social field—thereby resisting the dormancy of the archive—and aid in the discussion of his practice.

In her pioneering study of performance art, *Performance Art: Futurism to the Present* (1979), RoseLee Goldberg declares that 'by its very nature performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by

artists'. She adds, 'any strict definition would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself'.<sup>39</sup> Goldberg's emphasis on the 'live' nature of performance art, however, has been somewhat moderated with the increasing valorization of documentation, and the mediation of performance through its documentation. Yet, similar to the contested and conflicted attempts of defining performance art, the validity of such mediation is also a topic of debate.

In defiance of the mediation of performance through documentation, Peggy Phelan proclaims: 'Performance's only life is in the present.'<sup>40</sup> Her claim is in reference to the necessary and active participation of the audience, the 'presentness' required for performance art. On the contrary, Amelia Jones valorizes the mediated presentation, with which she claims the viewer can have a *performative* relationship.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, she asserts that mediated presentation offers neutrality enabling the viewer to become an embodied interpreter, which the 'manically charged' present of live performance denies.

What Adrian Heathfield defines as 'eventhood' can perhaps be considered as the culmination of the divergent approaches of Phelan and Jones. Similar to the idea of presence with relation to performance, 'eventhood' in Heathfield's terms involves 'bringing the reception of the artwork into the elusive conditions of the real, where the relation between experience and thought can be tested and re-articulated', and as such is a reference to the relationship between perception and interpretation of the work.<sup>42</sup> He writes: 'Eventhood allows spectators to live for a while in the paradox of two impossible desires: to be present in the moment, to savour it, and to save the moment, to still and preserve its power long after it has gone.'<sup>43</sup> While Heathfield's focus is contemporary practice of performance and its so-called flux, his comparison of documentation to a vestige of a moment past—a so-called relic to be saved into memory—is congruent to Jones's claim for the potency of documentation independent of the live moment it represents. As a matter of fact, (at least in its proposed form), *The Peterlee Project* carried this potency one step further. Designed as an openly structured workshop that necessitated 'a continuous process of formation', the project would essentially perpetuate the live moment through the making of *History Within Living Memory*, and the open platform for debate and action it would shift into. In this sense, the project combined memory (something ontologically belonging to the past) and living (a shared characteristic of society and performance), which was a stipulation of continuous becoming.

The perpetual characteristic of the project, and thus its openness, however, were not actualized. This in Brisley's terms 'nullified' his efforts, as such giving the project an 'ambiguous status' as a 'successful failure'; while it failed in achieving permanence, it succeeded in achieving a 'certain archival presence' in Perovic's terms.<sup>44</sup> This archival presence prompts Perovic to investigate the 'difference between performing history and the "becoming historical" of performance'.<sup>45</sup> However, what is at stake here is neither the project's historicity nor its efficacy in the performance of history: it is Brisley's non-partisan (also socially-orientated and functional as opposed to purely aesthetic) agenda of



stretching and extending performance into direct, social action through *The Peterlee Project*. Hence, writing about his intentions in hindsight, Brisley states that 'by extending the activity into the social dimension as an everyday process and taking on a role leading from behind, performance is transformed as it dissolves into the social environment as an agent'.<sup>46</sup> This dissolution is not so much an aspect of ephemerality as is often associated with performance, but the way in which actions become second nature to those involved. In Claire Bishop's terms, Brisley was 'testing out techniques from performance in a social context'<sup>47</sup> that could then potentially be applied elsewhere. When performance is transformed to an agent, it becomes a social tool, which was the essence of the project. In effect, the project would cease to exist as a project and become a model. Hence, rather than continuing as actions proposed or delegated by Brisley, these actions would be motivated by community interests. Accordingly, the project would avoid being 'circumscribed in time'<sup>48</sup> in the way that performance is understood. And, ultimately becoming an aspect of the everyday, the project as a social tool would be where the gap between art and life is bridged.

As Peter Bürger claims, 'The unification of art and life intended by the avant-garde can only be achieved if it succeeds in liberating aesthetic potential from the institutional constraints, which block its social effectiveness. In other words: the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the possible realization of a utopia in which art and life are united.'<sup>49</sup> Since *The Peterlee Project* was terminated before attempting liberation from institutional constraints, this unification was not achieved. Thus, instead of following up on Perovic, with an attempt to reveal convergences and divergences mostly in terms their shared material of 'time'; it is perhaps useful to consider Brisley's project as a failed success, and in terms of Brisley's intended extension of performance into the social, wherein his role as an artist ceases to be a producer and becomes a provider of 'critical-artistic service' in Kwon's terms.<sup>50</sup> Simply put, extended performance is the expansion and prolonging of performance in its broadest sense in the art historical narrative. In opposition to the understanding of performance as a juxtaposition of visual art and theatrical elements, Brisley asserts that 'the initial concept [of the artist] cannot be realized, until it itself has been overcome, transformed by others with a collective concern, through the public process'.<sup>51</sup> Through such a reversal of the concept of performance and the introduction of 'anti-performance', the artist can initiate what 'appears to be a non-alienated organic state, a total condition leading from the initial concept, through process on context, determining a necessary inter-functioning of conditions – art process, social context, political consciousness, collective action'.<sup>52</sup>

For Brisley, political action involved a withdrawal from the so-called market of art with its prescribed channels, and 'a reordering of the way art is made, the way it behaves, and is related to' as opposed to the understanding of political action as the 'wholesale acceptance of an ideology'.<sup>53</sup> Hence, by abandoning his specialist stance, the artist could be relocated as a central figure of society, and become a contributor to the 'common aim'. Through this embrace of

the humanist position—that of centring society around people with an emphasis on human value rather than material value—the artist would begin to act ‘politically’. And acting politically, the artist would essentially become a political actor, and thus a generator for change.

## Direct Action: Dissolving (Singular) Authority

Questions regarding authority, how authority is established, reneged, dissolved or shared constitute a crucial part of Brisley’s practice. As an educator, he inculcated the idea of authority as ‘a shared material within space and context’ to his students at the Slade School of Fine Arts from the late 1960s onwards. Tim Brennan posited that with *The Peterlee Project*, Brisley conveys the ‘fundamental question of what to do with power as a tangible material.’<sup>54</sup> By limiting his role to that of a consultant and letting the participants, and ultimately the community make decisions through an open and horizontal structure in which there aren’t any leaders but only project participants—essentially assuming the role of community ambassadors—was Brisley’s way of offering up authority.

The dissolution of singular authority through the fostering of audience participation was extended with *The Peterlee Project*, which effectively relied on participation. The collapsing of the boundary between artist and audience was furthered, when Brisley’s involvement was defined solely in terms of a consultancy. Hence, the audience ceased to exist as an audience, and began to take on an active role: it was the people of Peterlee that actually steered the project. Yet, in order for the project to be fully realized, the people of Peterlee had to come together through the public process and transform it with a collective concern without the need for a specified authority figure (which ultimately wasn’t the case for *The Peterlee Project*). In that sense, the project was Brisley’s method for emphasizing human agency instead of structural determinism. In fact, Brisley had formulated such a process in 1975, in a statement entitled ‘Anti-Performance Art’, which was included in the catalogue of the ‘Arte Inglese Oggi (1960–1976)’ exhibition in Milan. In what could also be read as a plea for the transcendence of ‘decadent individualism’, through his postulation of the concept of ‘anti-performance art’, Brisley strived to reposition performance so that it could potentially transpose the binary relationship between artist and audience, and thus differentiate it from theatre:

*It is no longer possible to conceive of this as a personal activity. The initial concept may arise through one person but it is very quickly modified, and transformed through collective involvement, which is critical. Each person assumes a role and set of responsibilities according to his/her understanding of the activity. These interactions of abilities continuously readjust themselves according to circumstances. The activity itself is capable of being transformed through many stages in relation to the initial concept—contextual circumstance, and [collective] action.<sup>55</sup>*

When it was repositioned as ‘anti’-performance art, performance was no longer predicated on the one-way

relationship between performer and audience. This type of bottom-up structuring was also reminiscent of the History From Below Movement, which in its earliest form was established in opposition to prefigurative politics, and promoted the same horizontalist approach of direct social action and even 'leaderless direct democracy'.

Essentially, the open structure of *The Peterlee Project*—from the functioning of the six participants to the open workshop intended for the final stage—was predicated on a form of egalitarian political process. In fact, Brisley's emphasis on horizontal principles such as self-governing and collective decision-making chimed with the idea of leaderless direct democracy advocated by self-proclaimed 'small a' anarchists' such as David Graeber.<sup>56</sup>

## Benefit of the Doubt

Why was *The Peterlee Project* a failed success? Or more precisely, what does failure (or success) mean in terms of projects? Are projects contingent or are they experiments? Was the project terminated because the district council and/or the PDC was not willing/able/ready to support—what must have been a novelty for them, despite the relative ubiquity of community projects—such an openly structured and socially-orientated project, which was predicated on egalitarian principles of collective action?

Then, again, that would be the highly likely but perfunctory answer. And its accuracy would be debatable. In reality, the termination of the project was most probably caused by the combination of several factors. One of these was the intrinsic cultural tradition related to industrial town communities, perhaps even more so for the mining community with its rigid hierarchical relations, chronic dependency on authoritarian and top-down structures. As a result, it was infinitely more difficult for members of the community to engage in open structures of leaderless direct democracy. A possible related factor might have been the domineering attitude of the disabled ex-miner participant. Other factors must have included limited funding both for the running of the project (e.g. operational costs, compensation for the participants, workshop space and etc.) as well as funding to support the continuation of the project and publicizing to create further engagement within and beyond the Peterlee community. Of course, another major factor was the destruction of valuable documents prepared specifically for the project. What probably was even more drastic than the material loss was its demoralizing effect on Brisley and the participants—presumably except John Porter, who was appointed by the Easington Council as the director of the project, which became a local history archive renamed *People Past and Present (Area of Easington)*, essentially antagonistic to almost all of the elements that were heretofore envisioned for the project including openness, horizontality, being leaderless, live and organic.

If one was to try and give the council and PDC the benefit of the doubt, if at least for a brief moment, then perhaps it's a legitimate suggestion that the project had not facilitated and/or handled conflict with enough care and encouragement. Perhaps more emphasis should have been

given to democratic participation with both intellectual and moral aims, while allowing participants to become 'actors'.<sup>57</sup> As Graeber posits, 'the best democratic process depends on the nature of the community involved, its cultural and political traditions, the number of people taking part, the experience level of the participants, and of course, what they are trying to accomplish—among any number of other immediate practical concerns.'<sup>58</sup> Which brings us to the central question: was the project already bound for failure before being terminated because the clash between tradition and the novelty posed by the open structure too grand to overcome?

Nevertheless, as an open and non-sectarian attempt, *The Peterlee Project* was a viable structure for attaining empowerment for the community. After all, it is important to keep in mind that sociopolitical shifts take time. When considering political and/or social transformation through art, it is crucial to regard artists as progressive agents and art as a transitional object between people: a tool that can shift ways of thinking, and as such, affect change.

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1. Artist-run organization conceived by Barbara Steveni in 1975, and founded by artists including John Latham, Barry Flanagan and David Hall among others to negotiate placements in governmental and industrial organizations.
2. New Towns were designated areas developed across Britain between 1946 and 1970 to alleviate the housing shortage and contribute to the reconstruction efforts after World War II. The New Towns Committee was sponsored by the post-war Labour Government, and was congruent with its commitment to major reforms that would pave the way to a system of peacetime planning, Nationalization and the Welfare State.
3. 'Artist Project Peterlee January 1976 - September 1977 Observations: Stuart Brisley', Tate Britain Archive, GB 70 TGA 20042/2/2/5/1. Victor Passmore's *Apollo Pavillion* (c. 1967) part walkway and part sculpture was designed to become the focal point of the town: 'not only optical but also "environmental" and pedestrian'. However, the structure was unpopular with the residents, and fell into despair shortly after opening, and was demolished upon a campaign proposed by locals in 2000. See *History is Now: 7 Artists Take on Britain* survey exhibition, Hayward Gallery, London, 2015; Burnham, Nigel; Harrison, David (16 July 2000), 'Sixties 'concrete bungle' sculpture to be scrapped', *The Daily Telegraph*, accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1348803/Sixties-concrete-bungle-sculpture-to-be-scrapped.html>
4. John Roberts, 'Brisley, Stuart', *Grove Art Online*. Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press, accessed November 2, 2015, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T011371>.
5. New Towns Act, 1946 9 & 10 Geo. 6. Ch. 68, accessed March 19, 2015,

- [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1946/68/pdfs/ukpga\\_19460068\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1946/68/pdfs/ukpga_19460068_en.pdf)
6. In 1974, Easington became a local government district in the eastern part of County Durham located in the North-east England.
  7. Author's interview with Stuart Brisley, 23 November 2013, London. Most residents were relocated in Peterlee due to the decisions made by various development corporations after the Distribution of Industry Act of 1945, which encouraged the move of new industry towards development areas.
  8. Brisley, interview, 23 November 2013.
  9. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value: Volume IV of Capital, Part 3*. (Progress Publishers, 1963), 513.
  10. Brisley in *The Peterlee Project 1976-1977*. Modern Art Oxford, and Museum of Ordure. ([London]; Aarhus: Museum of Ordure; Antipyrine, 2014), 121.
  11. Rebecca Schneider, 'Performance Remains', in Jones, Amelia, and Adrian Heathfield. *Perform, Repeat, Record Live Art in History*. Bristol: Intellect, 2012, 140.
  12. See Ann Laura Stoller, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance', *Archival Science*, 2002, vol. 2, nos. 1-2, pp. 87-109. See also Richard Thomas, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and Fantasy of the Empire*, New York: Verso, 1993.
  13. TGA 20042/2/2/5/1
  14. TGA 20042/2/2/5/1/8
  15. Oxford English Dictionary, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/39956?redirectedFrom=consultant&>> [accessed 12 April 2015]
  16. Gramsci asks, 'is it better to "think", without having a critical awareness ... or, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world?' adding that 'the starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is ...' See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 323.
  17. TGA 20042/2/2/5/1/1
  18. Brisley in *The Peterlee Project 1976-1977*, 122.
  19. Brisley, 'Proposal for II Peterlee Report presented at the Sunderland Art Centre in May/June 1977' TGA 20042/2/2/5/1/5
  20. TGA 20042/2/2/5/1/5
  21. Questions and proposals at the final stage could include: 'Why can't we paint our front doors the colour we want? Why can't we have allotments? Why is the Jaguar plant not employing people over 35?' Brisley quoted in Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London; New York: Verso Books, 2012, 337.
  22. TGA 20042/2/2/5/1/7
  23. Ibid.
  24. Ibid.
  25. TGA 20042/2/2/5/1/8
  26. TGA 20042/2/2/5/1/8; the meeting coincided with the completion of PDC's terms for the development of and responsibility in Peterlee. As a non-governmental organization contracted by the government, PDC was to hand-over all responsibility to the Easington District Council. Since the responsibility of overseeing Brisley's project was also transferred to the Council, decisions related to the project and its documents were within the jurisdiction of the Council.
  27. The Easington District Council became defunct in 2009 as part of the 2009 structural changes to local government in England.
  28. Brisley interview, 20 April 2015.
  29. *The Peterlee Project* was invited to documenta 6 Kassel, West Germany in June 1977 and to the National Eistedford, Wrexham, Wales in August 1977. See TGA 20042/2/2/5/1/8
  30. TGA 201114/4/10-11.
  31. Miwon Kwon, 'One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity', *October*, Vol. 80. (Spring, 1997), pp. 85-110; p. 96.
  32. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image / Music / Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, pp. 142-7.

33. Umberto Eco, 'Poetics of the Open Work', *The Open Work*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 1-23; p. 19.
34. Eco, 'Poetics of the Open Work', 3.
35. Ibid., 11.
36. David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, 2014; *Revolutions in Reverse*. (London; New York: Minor Compositions, 2011), 155, see δημοκρατία in Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, 'A Greek-English Lexicon', at Perseus; N. G. Wilson, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 511.
37. Sanja Perovic, 'Performing History: Some Keywords' in Stuart Brisley, Modern Art Oxford, and Museum of Ordure. *The Peterlee Project 1976-1977*. ([London]; Aarhus: Museum of Ordure; Antipyrine, 2014), 7.
38. Ibid.
39. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 8-9.
40. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.
41. Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
42. Adrian Heathfield, 'Alive', Adrian Heathfield (ed.), *Live: Art and Performance*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2004), 9
43. Heathfield, *Live: Art and Performance*, 9.
44. Perovic, 'Performing History', 9.
45. Ibid.
46. Brisley, Note inside front cover, *The Peterlee Project 1976-1977*. (2014)
47. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 174.
48. Perovic, 'Performing History', 9.
49. Peter Bürger and Bettina Brandt and Daniel Purdy. 'Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*', *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 695-715, 696.
50. Kwon, 'One Place after Another', 103
51. 'Anti Performance Art' Extract from the catalogue for Inglese Arte Oggi (1960–1976), November 1975 accessed February 21, 2015, [http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/29/70s/Text/Homage\\_to\\_the\\_Commune:\\_Stuart\\_Brisley\\_s\\_statement\\_in\\_the\\_catalogue\\_for\\_Arte\\_Inglese\\_Oggi/page:18](http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/29/70s/Text/Homage_to_the_Commune:_Stuart_Brisley_s_statement_in_the_catalogue_for_Arte_Inglese_Oggi/page:18).
52. Ibid.
53. Stuart Brisley. 'Statement made for Penrose award'. TGA 20042/2/2/5.
54. Tim Brennan, 'Of Commune and Community' in *The Peterlee Project 1976-1977*. (2014), 131.
55. 'Anti Performance Art' Extract from the catalogue for Inglese Arte Oggi (1960–1976).
56. See David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, 2014; *Revolutions in Reverse*. (London; New York: Minor Compositions, 2011).
57. Tosel Andre, 'In Francia', in *Gramsci in Europa e in America*, edited by E. J. Hobsbawm, (Rome-Bari: Laterza 1995), 11.
58. David Graeber, 'How Change Happens', *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, (Penguin Books, 2014), 208.