

The Morbid Symptoms of Capitalist Culture: Stuart Brisley's Placement with Hille & Co. Furniture Factory (1970–1972)

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To compose is to make use of what is known ... to unite the parts of a whole.¹

(Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, 1960)

In 1963, Robin Day designed the Q Stak chair for mass production.² The Q Stak chair was made for optimum functionality equipped with an injected moulded plastic shell supported by a tubular steel frame. Q Stak refers to one of the chair's most popular assets: it is stackable. Each chair slides perfectly into the next (Fig. 1). The Robin Day Q Stak chair was manufactured at the S. Hille & Co. Furniture Factory (Hille) in London throughout the 1960s/1970s. A single tool at the factory produced 4,000 chairs per week at a rate of 1.5 minutes per shell. Inspired by the prominent modernist architect Le Corbusier, the chair was described as a 'machine for sitting in'.³

In 1970, the Artist Placement Group's (APG) Barbara Steveni negotiated a placement between Hille and the artist Stuart Brisley. The APG was founded in 1965 by the artists Barbara Steveni, John Latham, Barry Flanagan, David Hall, Anna Ridley, and Jeffrey Shaw. Brisley's placement was one of more than nineteen placements in industry and government bodies negotiated by the APG throughout the 1970s.⁴ Through these placements, the APG sought to place a coalition of artists directly into new contexts. During his placement, Brisley chose to observe and work on Hille's Haverhill metal polishing shop floor, where he collaborated with workers to make a circular sculpture *Poly Wheel* (1970) (Fig. 4). *Poly Wheel* was made from 212 tubular steel Robin Day Q Stak chair frames.

In the following paper, I examine the intersection of art, design, and mass production in Brisley's placement with Hille. Through the protagonist of the Robin Day Q Stak chair, Brisley's *Poly Wheel* is situated within his larger body of work and contextualised within the post-1968 fractured political left and Britain's post-war political agenda of optimism, innovation, the expansion of mass production, and its contradictory methods. I argue that Brisley's work introduces an alternative narrative to the aesthetic ramifications of post-war mass production by reconsidering the relationship between the mass-produced object and working-class identity.⁵

I further argue that Brisley's work is rooted in an antagonistic performance that does not fit easily into the dominant narrative of conceptual art in Britain at this time. Instead, his work allows us to revisit the shifts in working conditions under mass production and through this to expose the political rifts between the individual and class collectivity, and, perhaps more significantly, the split within

1. Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers Inc., 1960), p. 20.

2. Robin Day Polyprop Q Stak chair, 1963 by Robin and Lucienne Day. Copyright Robin and Lucienne Day Foundation.

3. Sutherland Lyall, *Hille: 75 Years of British Furniture* (London: Elron Press in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1981), p. 53.

4. Antony Hudek and Alex Sainsbury, 'The Individual and the Organisation: Artist Placement Group 1966–79', *APG Tate Chronology* <http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/artist_placement_group/> and <<https://barbarasteveni.org>> [accessed 5 January 2020].

5. For the established narrative on the effect of mass production on 1960s' art production, see Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956–1966' in Andy Warhol edited by Annette Michelson. USA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001, pp. 1–46 and Jaimey Hamilton, Arman's System of Objects. *Art Journal*, 67:1, 2008, pp. 54–67.

6. Stuart Brisley, 'Report on APG Project at Haverhill', September 1970 – May 1973, Tate Archive, London, UK, p. 1.



Fig. 1. Q Stak chair, Robin Day, Hille, 1954. Copyright Robin & Lucienne Day Foundation.

the self between individualism and its potential for collective power. This paper asks: how does the relationship between the mass-produced object, the perceived identity of the collective working-class, and individual agency re-shape the conditions for aesthetic composition on the factory floor?

Why Not a Chair of Paper ... Why Not a Chair of Foam?

I agreed to work in a factory where they were completing various tasks, making chairs; some of them were very simple chairs, you know, stacking chairs, Robin Day stacking chairs, classic of its kind.⁶ (Stuart Brisley, 'Report on APG Project at Haverhill', 1973)

During the 1960s, the popularity of the Robin Day Q Stak chair and similar models established Hille as the leader of progressive mass-produced furniture design in Britain. The Robin Day chairs were the apex of Hille's brand, the key component in an economically efficient design line produced in collaboration with Robin Day and Hille's owners, Rosamind and Leslie Julius (Fig. 2). The Juliuses inherited Hille after World War II and sought to facilitate a transition from pre-World War II individual craftsmanship to post-World War II mass production. Hille regarded its transition to mass production not as an

American import but as a continuation of a particularly British design lineage that combined fine art with innovative design for mass production. Drawing inspiration from the mid-nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, Hille considered itself the heir to the legacy of British influence on international design movements such as the Bauhaus.⁷

However, Hille's choice in approach can also Hille's success in branding its production

approach as innovative was largely made possible through the Juliuses' relationships with many avant-garde artists and theorists in London at the time. These included Richard Hamilton, Reyner Banham, and Eduardo Paolozzi, to name a few. be considered symptomatic of a shift in production strategies at the time that was responding to an increase in international competition. This shift moved away from mass production and line assembly to greater product diversity and smaller batch production; what economists Piore and Sabel later defined as flexible specialisation. Flexible specialisation proposed to replace a strategy of high specialisation / low discretion jobs with greater flexibility of deployment, and a recuperation of 'craft judgement and skill'. Also central to flexible specialisation was the concept of 'responsible autonomy', which allowed workers more flexibility and independence while trusting that their work was in the company's best interests. Responsible autonomy effectively 'minimized task control' in favour of an ideological control that was implemented during employee training.⁹ Aspects of flexible specialisation, adopting 'craft judgement and skill' in combination with an attempt at a more fluid and responsive workshop on the factory floor, are most likely what Hille was referring to when marketing itself as part of the tradition of the Arts and Craft movement and the Bauhaus. These changing conditions of production and the Juliuses' presence within London's art scene made Hille a corporation that would be interested in hosting an APG placement and sympathetic to the intentions of an APG artist.¹⁰

At the time that Hille agreed to Brisley's APG placement, the designer Robin Day had complete creative control over branding and product design (with the exception of special commissions).¹¹ As a result, Hille's designs from that period predominantly reflect Day's own design concept for mass production; a process of design referred to as 'pre-forming specifications'.¹² 'Pre-forming specifications' was an innovative concept popularised by the aircraft industry during World War II that, by using mass-produced parts made from the newly invented material, plastic, made the design of plane interiors more efficient. Day agreed to work for Hille on the condition that the company would support this type of mass-produced design and thus allow him the freedom to translate 'pre-forming specifications' from military airplanes to mass-produced furniture.¹³

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Robin Day's Q Stak chair and similar models gained in sales and popularity, as accessible symbols of post-war Britain's consumer progress. The iconic nature of the chair was solidified in Britain's cultural imagination by variations being featured in influential design exhibitions, beginning with *The Festival of Britain* (1951), where an early plywood version of the chair, and Day, were introduced to the broadest possible public. Day was given the opportunity to design the seating for the Festival's auditorium.¹⁴ *The Festival*, often considered a watershed exhibition in British design history, reflected the UK Council of Industrial Design's ambitions for a new type of post-war designer, one adept in new technologies and able to appeal to the growing mass-consumer market. Still, it was not until 1969 that the chair specifically became synonymous with cultural progress, in the exhibition 'The Design Centre Comes to Newcastle'. At that exhibition, the Director of the Council



Fig. 2. Robin Day in his studio at Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, London with his Q Stak chair, Hille, 1953. Copyright Robin & Lucienne Day Foundation/photo Air Ministry.

7. Lyall, Hille, p. 39.

8. Lyall, Hille, p. 39.

9. Christel Lane, 'Industrial Change in Europe: The Pursuit of Flexible Specialisation in Britain and West Germany', *Work, Employment and Society*, no. 2, June 1988, Vol. 2, p. 142.

10. Barbara Steveni, 'Letter to Sir Paul Reilly', 1967 Tate Archive, London, UK.

11. Brisley, 'Report on APG Project at Haverhill', p. 1.

12. After seeing Day's work at MOMA Design Competition (1948), Hille had offered Day a unique contract; he was not considered an employee but an autonomous visionary. Lyall, Hille, p. 4.

13. Robin Day and his partner Lucienne Day also designed VC10 Aircraft interiors in 1967, in their role for the British Overseas Airways Corporation. Lesley Jackson, *Robin and Lucienne Day: Pioneers of Contemporary Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001).

14. Robin Day Chair at the Festival of Britain, 1951 was a 700 lounge chair, a development of a lounge chair he designed for the Royal Festival Hall, made from moulded plywood with walnut veneer interior and sycamore exterior.

15. Cheryl Buckley, *Designing Modern Britain* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p. 146.

16. Systems Theory was an early form of open-plan office design that was popularised in Germany a decade earlier under the name *Burolandschaft*. See Nikil Saval, *Cubed: The Secret History of the Workplace* (Norwell: Anchor, 2015).



Fig. 3. Polypropylene chairs, 1964, and armchairs, Robin Day, Hille, 1967 with a variety of different bases in original colours (charcoal, light grey and flame red), as well as dark blue (1968) and white (1970). Copyright Robin & Lucienne Day Foundation.

of Industrial Design and APG collaborator, Sir Paul Reilly, invited consumers to consider the design possibilities that the chair signified: ‘Why not a chair of paper ... Why not a chair of foam?’. The chair took centre stage, as the exhibition showcased not only Robin Day’s polypropylene chair but many other innovative designs, including Fredrick Scott’s foam seating, David Vartlett’s slot-together paper chair, and Quasar Khanh’s clear plastic inflatable chair. The gimmicky design strategy was marketed as chairs that were meant to be ‘throw aways’, while being at the same time sleek and stylish.¹⁵

As the 1960s came to a close, however, the Robin Day Q Stak chair’s marketing shifted from design darling, and daring, to corporate functionality. Hille, like many other design companies at this time, invested in a design trend referred to as Systems Furniture Theory, or Systems Theory.¹⁶ Within Systems Theory, each piece of furniture or unit was expected to be standardised and easily disassembled and re-assembled based on the activity needs of the office space. Nikil Saval in *Cubed* (2015) describes the Systems approach:

the real function of mass production is not to make large numbers of a variety of objects which have finite uses but to make large numbers of a relatively limited repertoire of items which are capable of being used together in an infinite variety of combinations.¹⁷

In other¹⁷ words, rather than the traditional gridded rows of office desks, Systems Theory installation was flexible and tailored, organising office spaces as a series of spatial networks, which ideally worked together to compose an administrative landscape that valued employees' individual preferences and created a social atmosphere, however corporatised. The adoption of Systems Theory in furniture was meant to facilitate an office management style that involved parts of the corporation acting as a holistic organism as opposed to isolated units.¹⁸ The influence of Systems Theory shifted Hille's concept design from a compatible line of furniture geared towards the individual to an aesthetic system of furniture units. This conceptual shift is apparent in a Hille advertisement from 1967 that positions Robin Day chairs on white platforms of varying heights. Four of the six chairs face the camera. The other two face each other almost as if in conversation (Fig. 3).¹⁹

Contradictory Configurations

While the success of Hille's Robin Day Q Stak chair and its evolution to systems theory was thought to encourage a more social atmosphere in the office and on the factory floor, the accelerated rate of consumption by the working class was regarded by intellectuals at the time as a threat to collective action.²⁰ Within British Cultural Studies, Richard Hoggart influentially expressed this concern in *The Uses of Literacy* (1958): 'we are moving towards a mass culture ... and that new mass culture is in some important ways less healthy than the often crude culture it is replacing'.²¹ That anxiety was later articulated by Simon Charlesworth in *The Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience* (1999), describing this period as one in which the 'mutual respect and recognition of structures of feeling produced through the processes and self-discipline of meaningful work are now replaced by individualistic performance and the display of commodity desire'.²² That is, British Cultural Studies recognised that the post-war democratisation of consumer goods facilitated by mass production was two-edged: essential to the upward mobility of the working class from the perspective of industrial marketing and governmental policy such as the Beveridge Report (1942), and contributing to the erosion of working-class collective identity from the perspective of the intellectual left.

In addition, the international ramifications of 1968 fractured the intellectual left itself in Britain, manifesting in a scattered movement that sought to overturn established hierarchies in education and cultural institutions.²³ According to Bryn Jones and Mike O'Donnell's *Sixties Radicalism and Social Movement Activism: Retreat or Resurgence* (2010), while the events of 1968 in Britain did not translate into the systemic political reform of say France, Italy, or Germany, there were significant 'life-style value' changes that were evident in an increasingly socialist left cultural and education sector.²⁴ In a later interview with the British Library, Stuart Brisley re-asserted this view when he stated: 'In the UK, eruptions [during the late 1960s] were largely concerned with the restrictive nature of traditional cultural and educational practices, which were typical across the board'.²⁵

The momentum of the late 1960s to abolish established hierarchies spurred an urgency within the London avant-garde to pursue interdisciplinary reform within art education and beyond. Arguably, the most influential of these 'eruptions' to Brisley's practice was the sit-in also known as the 'Hornsey Affair'.²⁶

17. Lyall, *Hille*, p. 40.

18. Richard A. Johnson, Fremont E. Kast, and James E. Rosenzweig, *Management Science*, vol. 10, no. 2, January 1964, pp. 367–384.

19. 'Although the Polypropylene Chair was originally developed in 1963, it was the Mark II version, launched the following year, which was adopted as the standard design. Manufactured with an array of different bases, the tub-shaped Polypropylene Armchair was added in 1967'. <<http://www.robinandlucienndayfoundation.org/lives-and-designs/1960s/polypropylene-chair-mark-ii-and-polypropylene-armchair>> [accessed 15 January 2020].

20. This topic became a concern for intellectual movements such as British Cultural Studies (E. P. Thompson, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall). See John Kirk, *Class, Culture and Social Change*, p. 14.

21. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 324.

22. Simon Charlesworth, *The Phenomenology of Working-Class Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 2.

23. Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: Verso Editions, 1980), pp. 176–80.

24. Bryn Jones and Mike O'Donnell's *Sixties Radicalism and Social Movement Activism: Retreat or Resurgence* (2010) examines the protests in art education in London during this time through the narratives of student and staff publications, such as 'The Hornsey Affair', and the Institute of Contemporary Art's (ICA) magazine.

25. Stuart Brisley, 'National Life Stories Artists' Lives Interviewed by Melanie Roberts', London: British Library (2015) <<https://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/021T-C0466X0043XX-0000A1.pdf>> [accessed 15 February 2020].

26. The word 'eruptions' is used by Brisley in his interview with Melanie Roberts for the British Library. The Hornsey Sit-In and the A Course at Saint Martins have been referred to in interviews conducted by the author with Garth Evans, Stuart Brisley, and Barbara Steveni in London between 2016 and 2020.

27. Stuart Brisley, Hornsey College of Art, 'To the Authorities Whoever They Are', 1968. Stuart Brisley Archive, London, UK. Brisley describes how the event brought together art colleges and the Trade Union Congress. See also the 'Pigeon Challenge' held in Trafalgar Square.

28. Lisa Tickner, *Hornsey 1968 The Art School Revolution* (London: Francis Lincoln Ltd, 2008), p. 15.

29. Tickner, p. 89. Tickner describes Fuller's influence on the Sit-In as the following: 'Buckminster Fuller was a tacet reference point here – self-described “comprehensivist and embodiment of an “emerging synthesis of artist, inventor, mechanic, objective economist and evolutionary strategist”’. Fuller taught at Black Mountain College in the 1940s. Also see Richard Buckminster Fuller, *Buckminster Fuller: Anthology for the New Millennium* (London: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

30. Tickner, pp. 51, 66, 80. David Warren Piper in his 'Readings in Art and Design Education', quoted by Tickner, states: 'Our concern is education. This implies the pursuit of social change'. In response, Tickner states: 'If the educational system did not produce some people who occasionally bit the hand that fed them, then it would have failed in the task entrusted to it' (p. 66). Tickner importantly identifies the duality of these expectations when she states: 'The linear system failed at both, at integrating art and design into the life of a modern capitalist society (because in a period of change it was training in outdated techniques and ideas) and in producing things good in themselves (regardless of commerce and fashion). The network system, they claimed succeeded at both, because it offered a flexible training in generalized creative design, adaptable to changing circumstances and because the imaginative qualities needed to produce the versatile designer of the future were no different from the ideal ones required to produce maximal individual development ...'.

32. Tickner, pp. 86–9.

32. Stuart Brisley, 'National Life Stories', p. 160.

Requiem for 1968

On 28 May 1968, Stuart Brisley, an artist and part-time instructor, sat on the floor of the Hornsey College of Art with fellow faculty and students. What is now commonly referred to as the 'Hornsey Sit-In' was a student and staff protest that occupied the Crouch End campus of Hornsey College of Art for six months. The protest took the form of a 'teach in' or 'work in' demanding first financial reform and later curriculum reform. At the end of six months, local authorities repossessed the campus and the requests for reform were not granted. Yet despite not achieving their primary goals, the Sit-In and related protests created a shared ideological platform by introducing younger artists like Brisley to an older generation, including John Latham, who later invited Brisley to join the APG.

Brisley, a Sit-In staff organiser, describes the demands of the occupiers as a call for educational structures to be 'transformed into collective democracies'.²⁷ Art historian Lisa Tickner's publication, *Hornsey 1968 The Art School Revolution* (2008), describes in detail the Sit-In's demands, context, and aftermath. Within the account, Tickner importantly identifies the larger pressures that crafted the vision of the Sit-In reformers, specifically the demand to modernise design and vocational schools:

The lack of industrial designers was hindering the impetus to improve trade products, modernize production and increase exports in a period of intensified international competition. In this sense the reform of art and design education, the consequence of liberal pedagogy and ministerial pragmatism, was one aspect of a broader strategy to modernize higher education in the context of the Cold War.²⁸

The seemingly divergent aims identified by Tickner – pragmatism put forth through a liberal pedagogy – came together in a series of lectures and group discussions held throughout the Sit-In. The key speakers for the lectures included experimental psychologist R. D. Laing, designer Buckminster Fuller, and APG artist John Latham.²⁹ The speakers revealed that in an increasingly professionalised and at the same time 'deskilled' field, the Sit-In sought to combine individual growth with marketable skills.³⁰ This juxtaposition, Tickner asserts, modified the role of designers, requiring more conceptual thinking combined with a sense of 'novelty derived from the idea of the fine artist'.³² Liberal pedagogy's 'deskilling' thus simultaneously motivated a move towards a more socially conscious and conceptually driven design while at the same time establishing an expectation, similar to the APG mission, to channel this creativity back into an often rigid corporate industry.

In later interviews, Brisley describes the Hornsey Sit-In and subsequent actions as a pivotal moment culturally, and for him personally. Brisley states that, 'after 1966 there was still the hope of a new start a new way of being a collective but as the 70s progressed this idea became harder, difficult and ultimately had to change altogether'. The capacity for real collective change had, in Brisley's view, ended in 1968.³²

In the aftermath of 1968, Brisley arguably saw the APG as an opportunity for a new type of collective working in the now increasingly muddled realm between conceptual thinking and corporate industry. For if the capacity for 'real' change through collective action had, according to Brisley, failed, the internal workings of that collective, he thought, must be rethought. From the beginning of Brisley's involvement with the APG, he adopted an antagonistic approach to the APG's mission and hierarchy of individuals. Brisley contested the leadership of Latham through his rejection of a specific clause in the APG's standard contract

that states, 'I will not knowingly do anything which might prejudice the company's interests'.³³ From Brisley's perspective this clause committed 'the artist to an implicit support of the company's interest at board room level' and consequently dictated that APG artists were to perpetually side with management during placements. While Latham and Steveni disagreed with his interpretation of the clause, Brisley argued it was ethically against his practice's commitment to the working class. Brisley's political position would be further developed in later projects such as his unrealised 1970s' Miners Opera and his second APG placement that was dedicated to creating a community archive for the working-class new town of Peterlee (1977).³⁴ In Brisley's view, the clause not only placed his own practice in a precarious position, but also compromised the whole APG project. The APG's refusal to acknowledge the history of class struggle between workers and management, in Brisley's view, inevitably led to the Group mission working against itself.³⁵ Brisley's political perspective on class conflict therefore not only challenged the leadership of the Group but also informed a post-1968 Hornsey Sit-In approach to art-making, whose objective was not collaboration but an internal investigation of the class politics of that collective.

In a 1972 document titled 'No It Is Not On', Brisley describes what he viewed as the often-detrimental relationship between the individual and the collective or 'controlling group':

In capitalist societies the habitual definition of individual freedom is seen as an assumption of a right to exercise individual initiative directed towards the potential increase of individual wealth. However, the majority of people find themselves in a position of selling their individual abilities in exchange for the material means of survival at the expense of other fundamental human needs. They serve the interests of the individual or controlling group which has the power to create the circumstances for the production and acquisition of profit.³⁶

The phrase 'they serve the interests of the individual or controlling group' is in part a thinly veiled criticism of Latham's control of the APG's mission. But the criticism is larger in scope: it sets out an antagonistic relationship to collective working that located the tension between individualism and collectivity at the centre of his practice.

Unofficial Actions

On 5 March 1968, the same year as the Sit-In, Brisley and the kinetic artist Peter Sedgley attended an event at the Tate Gallery,³⁷ a performance by the Nouveau Réaliste artist César. During the performance, César poured liquid polyurethane into pools on the ground outside the entrance to the museum. The pools of liquid plastic expanded and solidified into large foam blobs, creating a chemically induced self-forming sculpture. After the performance, audience members were invited to break off parts of the foam sculpture for César to sign and take home as their own. Brisley recounts that he and Sedgley broke off part of the sculpture, but instead of taking home their signed pieces they secured the bits of sculpture to the iron rail of the Tate's front gate. According to Brisley, they then convinced an observer to strike a match and set the pieces aflame. The material proved to be so flammable that the fire brigade had to be called in.irate Tate employees closed the event and shocked audience members went home.³⁸

The relatively few accounts of this performance interpret Brisley's action as an act of 'antagonism' towards the Tate institution or as a critique of César's technological radicalism in favour of a more destructive radicality towards the art establishment. For example, Jonah Westerman has said that 'For Brisley performance was about antagonizing the artistic establishment. His performances

33. Artist Placement Group, 'An APG Draft Contract', 1970, Stuart Brisley Archive, London, UK.

34. See Stuart Brisley's, 'Notes on the Unrealized Miners Opera' (2004) <http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/29/70s/Text/Miners_Opera/page:31> [accessed 15 February 2020].

And see Brisley's second APG placement with Peterlee. Peterlee was a 'new town' constructed by a development corporation. <http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/27/70s/Works/Artist_Project_Peterlee_History_Within_Living_Memory/page:27> [accessed 15 November 2019].

35. Stuart Brisley, 'Hille Fellowship – Factory and Artist: The Industrial Context', 1970, Stuart Brisley Archive, London, UK.

36. Stuart Brisley, 'No It Is Not On'. 1972, Stuart Brisley Archive, London, UK, p. 1.

37. The Tate Gallery was re-named Tate Britain after the opening of Tate Modern.

38. Stuart Brisley, 'Unofficial or Unscheduled Action at Tate', 5 March 1985. Tate Archive.

39. Jonah Westerman, 'Stuart Brisley with Peter Sedgley, *Unscheduled Action 1968*', *Performance at Tate: Into the Space of Art* (Tate Research Publication, 2016) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/perspectives/stuart-brisley>> [accessed 23 November 2020]. Also see P. Overy, John Roberts, and Stuart Hood, *Stuart Brisley: [Performances, etc.]*, exhibition catalogue, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London 1981. And N. P. James, *Stuart Brisley: Enactments*, London, 2005.

40. Pierre Restany, 'Modern Magic at the Tate', *Studio International*, vol. 175, no. 901, June 1968, p. 332.

41. See Kristine Stiles, 'The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the "DIAS Affect"'. In Gustav Metzger, *Geschichte*, edited by Sabina Breitwieser (Vienna; Ostfildern-Ruit: Generali Foundation and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), pp. 41–65. Also see Heike Roms, *Silent Explosion: Ivor Davies and Destruction in Art*, London: Occasional Papers, 2016.

42. Stuart Brisley, 'Report', n.d., Tate Archive, London, UK.

43. Brisley, 'Report', n.d.

themselves, moreover, worked to describe the nature of that opposition'.³⁹ Yet while this action can be perceived as a somewhat juvenile act of rebellion, this surface reading is complicated when we examine the material network that the act embodies.

The liquid plastic used to perform 'chemical magic' in César's work was, as described above, considered a symbol of technological progress, an affordable and accessible popular material used in mass production. In the words of Nouveau Réaliste critic Pierre Restany, 'The formally dressed audience gasped at this demonstration of chemical magic ...'.⁴⁰ The act of destroying this technological wonder via burning also had special relevance to British Conceptual art, occurring as it did just two years after the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) held in London (1966). DIAS, organised and articulated by the artist Gustav Metzger, like Brisley and Sedgley's 'unofficial action' (sometimes referred to as 'unscheduled action'), held events on the grounds of prominent institutions and some even adopted the strategy of burning.⁴¹ For example, one of DIAS's events was the APG's own John Latham's *Skoob Tower Ceremony* in which he burned a tower of encyclopedias and reference books in front of the British Museum.

Taking the context of the process and materials into consideration, Brisley and Sedgley's action, whether consciously or not, can be viewed as tangibly and aggressively linking institutional critique with the spectacle of mass-consumed innovation. Further, by hijacking César's performance, Brisley and Sedgley do not simply destroy another artist's work but turn César's 'chemical magic' into the charred residue of the intersection of mass manufacturing and cultural institutions. Whether intentionally or not, the implications of the intersection of these larger superstructures (shifts in mass production, the individual within the collective and cultural institutions, and the concerns of material culture) became more fully developed during Brisley's placement with Hille and his performance work during the same period as his placement.

The Factory

Brisley began his APG placement by visiting Hille's factory at Watford, just north of London. In notes, he describes his first impression:

I went to the factory with some naïve concepts based on visits to other factories. Hille was surprising in that the production procedures seemed to be geared to the odd or one-off situation, i.e., there are no rigid mass production procedures but rather a number of possibilities in terms of current and previous designs or unique commissions which the production procedures are designed to accommodate.⁴²

Brisley's description reflects the image of Hille described earlier, that of a workshop utilising aspects of flexible specialisation and guided by an attempt at responsible autonomy. Brisley elaborates:

I was intrigued to see that the organic fluid system not only operated in terms of wide production, machinery had been modified, changed and some had actually been built from scratch to overcome technical problems of production ... a group of people who ... were capable of using their ingenuity in solving any particular problems arising in the factory ... [this] poses APG with a difficult set of decisions.⁴³

From Brisley's observations, the role of the artist as a facilitator of factory innovation and cohesion was in question. What role, if any, could be found on a factory floor that already seemed to be flexible, interdisciplinary, and collaborative? That question more or less identifies the APG project: what role, if any, does the artist serve when placed in an unknown context?

This question, however, is largely defined by the personal interests of each artist in the context of each placement. In a 1971 placement report, Brisley declared his intention: 'I chose the metal polishing floor because I believed that was where the workers had the least amount of choice'.⁴⁴ Reflecting his personal politics, Brisley chose to locate himself on the factory floor.

The Haverhill metal polishing floor was part of the larger factory that opened the same year that Brisley started his placement (1970). The new factory was to accommodate Hille's expansion to mass production for international markets. Starting that year, a third of its product was internationally exported.⁴⁵ In his placement notes, Brisley describes the conditions of the new shop floor:

just at the point that I arrived they doubled the work force, and there were all kinds of problems in relation to the quality control, the quality control manager had been able to hold in his head where everything was but suddenly it had all doubled and he couldn't find it. He had a sort of breakdown because, you know like, because the old system didn't work anymore. So they were in the process of real change and they built part of this new factory, or a new part of the factory, and they put in the polishing part of it, and I chose to work in that place because it was the least, it was where people had the least choice in terms of what they did.⁴⁶

Despite Hille's progressive, innovative, and flexible approach to production, the floor of the new metal factory was experiencing the effects of rapid expansion and subsequently shifts in labour practices. Managers who used to oversee small artisan work teams now struggled to manage rapid job growth and factory additions. Brisley observed that the ramifications of this expansion crystallised into an 'anarchic' environment on the metal polishing floor; and an ill-equipped management was overwhelmed by change.⁴⁷

Brisley viewed these problems of expansion as an opportunity ... a tear in the fabric of production in which he could start his work.⁴⁸ Brisley thus began his placement by seeking to better understand these contradictory conditions through the perspective of the shop floor workers, to gain direct insight into the workers' concerns, and to 'gain the worker's trust'.⁴⁹ To do this, he facilitated the painting of the metal polishing machines according to the operators' favorite football team colours. In many cases, the workers helped paint the machines.⁵⁰

While the interest in this activity was short-lived, Brisley learned through this collaboration that the workers' primary concern was their exclusion from or difficulty in conversing with management, which had created a general atmosphere of distrust leading to various suspicions. For example, problematic architectural details of the factory space were interpreted as oppression tactics by management. Why were the windows placed so high on the factory floor? According to the workers, it was because 'they don't want us to be able to see outside'.

From a more macro perspective, Brisley's observations and discussions with workers illuminate the problem that factory production had not completely adapted to a flexible specialisation model, and that this shortcoming had materialised in a breakdown of communication between management and the shop floor. These contradictions within production during this time reflect what the economist Lane described as the British implementation of 'half-hearted' and 'inconsistent' Taylorist models in combination with elements of flexible specialisation.⁵¹ Lane observes:

ideological control is neither fully committed to task control nor to a strategy of responsible autonomy ... The combination in British employer strategies of a high division of labour with only a patchy task control is complemented by an employment relationship, based on the principle of minimum interaction.⁵²

44. Brisley, 'Report', n.d.

45. Lyall, *Hille*, p. 39.

46. Brisley, 'Report on APG Project'.

47. Brisley, 'National Life Stories'.

48. In an undated text written sometime during the 1970s, *Fine Art and Prejudice*, Brisley states: 'The questioning of Art practices which are so inextricably inter-related to commercial practices either in actuality or potentially through the venal ambitions of the artist must take into consideration the nature of the total process and reveal the inherent contradictions of that process'.

49. Brisley, 'Report on APG Project'.

50. Hille, 'Placement *Poly Wheel* and Painted Machines'. Copyright Stuart Brisley <http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/27/70s/Works/Hille_Fellowship/page:4> [accessed 15 February 2019].

51. Lane, 'Industrial Change in Europe', p. 150.

52. Lane, 'Industrial Change in Europe', p. 150.

53. Lane, 'Industrial Change in Europe', p. 151.

54. Brisley, 'Report on APG Project'.

55. Brisley, 'Report on APG Project'.

56. Brisley, 'Report on APG Project'.

57. Brisley, 'National Life Stories', p. 164.

58. Lyall, *Hille*, p. 56.

Lane concludes that since British semi-skilled workers received such narrow training and have so little communication with management, their only chance to improve their working conditions lies in collective organisation.⁵³

Through the painting of the machines, Brisley had found what he wanted to find, that is, the inherent conflict between workers and management that framed his personal politics. The problem was arguably symptomatic of a larger breakdown in Hille's shifting methods of mass production somewhere in between Taylorism and flexible specialisation. In his placement report, Brisley describes his approach to this conflict:

I was conscious it was my responsibility to be open and informative both to those on the shop floor and to management. It is no secret at the time that there were clear divisions between managements and the labour forces across British industry, and that features of the British class system were at work together with the characteristics of the basic education system at the time. It was my intention to speak to all this and to formulate methods to extend communication between the various aspects of shop floor working and then to institute places and facilities where the shop floor/and management could communicate with each other largely through text.⁵⁴

Adopting the role of a facilitator, Brisley placed noticeboards strategically throughout the factory floor to formulate a method of communication that could be used by all levels of employee. The noticeboards were intended to be used for any type of announcements, from sports to social grievances. But, despite providing the opportunity for better communications within the workplace, Brisley did not view his intervention as fulfilling the mediating role between management and the workers. In a 1973 placement report titled 'Report on APG Project at Haverhill Sept. 1970–1973', Brisley more clearly articulates his intention: 'I thought that the most important part about this was to get people to start to think for themselves and to represent themselves ... So, they wouldn't think that I had actually in some sense assisted them'.⁵⁵ Brisley's choice of using the format of the noticeboard can therefore be regarded as strategic, allowing for individuals to take the initiative for exchange through text. But at the same time, he left it up to the workers and management to choose what their message would be. Subsequently, Brisley did not see his role within Hille as an instigator of 'revolution' against management; in his words, he 'merely pointed out that the work force had far more creativity collectively than management had given them credit for'.⁵⁶

Yet the longer Brisley spent on the Haverhill shop floor the more his focus began to shift from the disconnect between workers and management to an inherent, larger problem: the disconnect between workers and what they were making. In a later interview, Brisley recounts: 'I found for example that people were machining and cleaning bits of metal who knew nothing about Marcel Breuer, nothing about what they were doing, absolutely hadn't a clue what they were doing'.⁵⁷ Brisley's ambitions of facilitation changed to a preoccupation with the process of commodity production.

As indicated, from the chair to systems design, Hille's commodity production from the 1950s to the 1970s was almost exclusively defined by the Robin Day chair. However, Brisley refers to a notable exception, the commission for replicas of Bauhaus designer Marcel Breuer's chair model B33 for the UNESCO building in Paris, and Skidmore Owings and Merrill's furniture for the Istanbul Hilton (1970). Hille's re-production of Breuer's designs was felt to be an appropriate fit for the company that considered itself to be carrying on the Bauhaus legacy in its approach to British design.⁵⁸

Originally manufactured in 1926, the Marcel Breuer chair made from a tubular steel frame can in many ways be considered the predecessor to the Robin Day

chair. The Breuer chair was also ergonomically efficient and infinitely compatible within the larger Bauhaus 'steel system' of mass-produced furniture.⁵⁹ Further, in the context of the Bauhaus's experimental design school and workshop (1919–1933), Breuer's chair was not only a unit of a functional future but also a vehicle for representing future political change. The importance of Breuer's chair to the Bauhaus's imagery and political thought is most directly seen in Erich Consemüller's print *Untitled* (Ilse Gropius in B3 club chair, 1926).⁶⁰ The major elements of the black and white photograph's composition are a figure sitting in a Marcel Breuer club chair in a nondescript space. The only light source pierces the figure's chest. The figure wears a mask made by the Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer, and a dress in fabric designed by Lis Beyer. The mask is unadorned, and the face is only suggested through abstracted geometric shapes.

While the figure's sex is coded as female by the attire and by the title of the photograph, the mask covers the head entirely.

The figure's 'facelessness' in Consemüller's image has been a popular and controversial topic for Bauhaus historians. In her text 'Bauhaus Fundamentals', Leah Dickerman has argued that the 'facelessness' of the mask represents not only anonymity but also a lack of identity symbolic of the Bauhaus's greater political vision of unifying artistic mediums — a vision that must be inextricably linked to a vision of the future that is classless.⁶¹ This view has been challenged by other art historians such as Robin Schuldenfrei who drew attention to the luxury status of Bauhaus design and argued that its political intention did not succeed in reaching a mass public. Whatever the discrepancy between Bauhaus idealism and its actual market, Dickerman's interpretation is valuable in the context of Hille because it places Breuer's chair at the centre of a Bauhaus political agenda that, according to Dickerman, sought to collapse the hierarchy of medium specificity to mirror its egalitarian political intentions. Dickerman's argument is that the Bauhaus equated the democratisation of design with the elimination of class divisions: a vision epitomised in Consemüller's photograph that brings the dual aesthetic and political vision to the general public.⁶²

That Hille's workers were manufacturing replicas of Breuer's chair some forty years later, without knowing this history, is not only ironic but culturally symbolic. The Breuer chair's detachment from its original radicalism reflects the gloomy commodified afterlife of originally politically charged objects. Reduced to a free-floating image, the chair becomes part of a premature postmodern pastiche far from the Bauhaus's utopic vision of the future. The fate of Breuer's chair represents the macro scale of post-war mass production's alienation of labour and its subsequent erasure of the cultural object's relationship to working-class identity.

At Hille, Brisley argued that the workers' alienation was created by the conditions of mass production, which on the metal polishing floor was centred around steel frames coming off the conveyor belt. Brisley noticed that if the steel frames came directly off the conveyor belt and were left unmoved, they would accumulate to form an uninterrupted circle of chairs. Brisley described the factory belt as going 'round on itself'; the stackable design of the Robin Day Q Stak chair facilitated each chair stacking seamlessly into the next. In Brisley's notes, he describes the circle of chairs produced by the conveyor belt as resembling the conveyor belt itself. The objects of production were made into the same shape as that of the process of their production.

Brisley further observed that the drudgery of the shop floor's mundane labour reflected the cyclical nature of the conveyor belt. Each day, each task, was like the chairs, each one fitting seamlessly into the next. At the end of his placement with Hille, Brisley made a sculpture titled *PolyWheel* (1970) with the aid of workers

59. Girard Xavier, *Bauhaus* (New York: Perseus Distribution Services, 2003), p. 4.

60. Eric Consemüller, *Untitled* (Woman (Lis Beyer or Ilse Gropius) in B3 club chair by Marcel Breuer wearing a mask by Oskar Schlemmer and a dress in fabric designed by Beyer), 1926. Gelatin silver print. Copyright private collection.

61. Leah Dickerman, 'Bauhaus Fundamentals', in Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman (eds), *Bauhaus 1919–1933: Workshops for Modernity* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), p. 24.

62. For an alternative perspective on the Bauhaus workshops, see Robin Schuldenfrei, *Luxury and Modernism: Architecture and the Object in Germany 1900–1933* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

(a)



(b)



Fig. 4. Stuart Brisley, Hille Placement *Poly Wheel*, 1970. Copyright Stuart Brisley.

from the metal shop floor. *Poly Wheel* is a circular sculpture made out of 212 Robin Day Q Stak chair frames (Fig. 4).⁶³

63. Brisley, 'Report on APG Project'.

64. Buchloh, 'Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art: 1956–1966', p. 10. sculpture and exhibitions at the time see: Joy Sleeman, 'The New Art, Hayward Gallery, London, 1972: New as Compromise, or When What Happens Around the Exhibition Is as Interesting as What Happens in the Exhibition.' *The Sculpture Journal* 21, no. 2 (2012) pp. 63–74.

Three Dimensional

The 212 Robin Day chair frames that make up Brisley's sculpture *Poly Wheel* made in collaboration with shop floor workers at Hille are identical. The steel legs of the chairs feather out like a wreath around a hollow centre. The circle gives the illusion of seamlessness; the Robin Day chair frames are structured in the sculpture as they are produced on the conveyor belt, in sequence.

Poly Wheel's use of the Q Stak chairs acts as a multi-referent, referencing the chair not only as an icon championed by mass-produced design but also, its equally iconic function within conceptual art. Richard Hamilton's *Interior II* (1964), Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965), David Lamelas' *Office of Information about the Vietnam War at Three Levels...* (1968), and Victor Burgin's *Performative / Narrative* (1971), amongst others, situate the mass-produced chair, the 'office chair', as central to constructing the relationship between larger bureaucratic culture and conceptual compositions. During the same period as Brisley, Kosuth's assembled commentary on the chair as an object, word, and image, and Burgin's series of sixteen black and white photographs of office chairs behind a desk utilised the empty chair as a signifier in place of the human figure and further signified the mass-produced object at the heart of a network of larger corporate and political power structures.

Like Burgin's series of photographs, Brisley's stacking of the chairs is serial. Benjamin Buchloh, in his influential essay 'Andy Warhol's One Dimensional Art: 1956–1966', refers to seriality as one of the major visual tropes in artists' response to the conditions of post-war mass production. Buchloh states:

That sense of composing depicted objects and arranging display surfaces in a serially structured grid emerges after all from the serial condition that constitutes the very 'nature' of the commodity in all its aspects: its object status, its design, and its display.⁶⁴



65. Arman, *Le Murex/The Nautilus, Accumulation Renault No. 103*. 1967 car fenders. Musée d'Art Modern de la Ville de Paris. Copyright Renault.

Fig. 5. Arman, *Le Murex/The Nautilus, Accumulation Renault No. 103*, 1967, welded assembly of car fenders. © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

Yet the artistic strategy of seriality in this period manifests in distinctly different ways and necessitates situating Brisley's work with greater specificity.

Putting the choice of the chair aside for a moment, Brisley's interest in factory process and seriality shares the most striking situational and aesthetic similarities to César's fellow Nouveau Réaliste, Arman. During the same period as Brisley's placement, Arman collaborated in a residency scheme with the Renault car manufacturing plant in Boulogne-Billancourt, France. Like Brisley, he spent time observing the manufacturing process at the factory, and photographs capture him performatively wearing a worker's jumpsuit on the car production line. During his time at Renault, Arman made a series of sculptures, titled the *Accumulation* series (1967–1974), that were composed from products he observed being produced for mass consumption on the factory floor. For example, a sculpture tilted *Le Murex* (1967), or the nautilus, is made from the smooth stacking of white Renault 4CV car fenders (Fig. 5).⁶⁵

It is difficult to look at *Le Murex* (1967) without getting seduced by the clean white shiny car parts naturalised in shape by their mimicry of the nautilus's

66. Jaimey Hamilton, 'Arman's System of Objects', *Art Journal*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2008, p. 56.

67. Benjamin Buchloh, 'Plenty of Nothing: From Yves Klein's *Le Vide* to Arman's *Le Plein*', first published in Bernard Blistène (ed.) *Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts and Design from France, 1958–1998*, (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998).

68. Hamilton, 'Arman's System of Objects', p. 67.

69. Hamilton, 'Arman's System of Objects', p. 61.

70. Brisley, 'National Life Stories', p. 164.

71. Unbounded seriality is identified by Anderson as a self-identified collective body. One of his primary examples is the working class. Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 29 and Partha Chatterjee, 'Anderson's Utopia', *Diacritics*, vol. 29, no. 4, Winter 1999, p. 128.

shell. To summarise art critic Pierre Restany's description of Arman's work, it was a manifestation of contemporary technological society.⁶⁶ In another text, 'Plenty or Nothing: Yves Klein's *Le Vide* and Arman's *Le Plein*' (1998), Buchloh describes Arman's work from this period similarly, when he refers to the sculptures as 'mere reiterations of a pure and unmediated facticity ...'.⁶⁷ More recently, Jaimey Hamilton in her text 'Arman's System of Objects' (2008), has drawn attention to the difficulty of Arman's position in the factory when making this work, describing 'Arman's complicated maneuvering to keep capitalism "framed" while it was framing him'.⁶⁸

Yet where Buchloh historically positions Arman's work within the dialectical conditions of the trauma of World War II and its opposite, the exponential growth of a culture of consumerism and spectacle, Hamilton reconsiders Arman's relevancy, re-framing his work around the question of abundance and networks. Referring to Arman's accumulations, Hamilton states:

In their accumulation, it did not matter what the electric razors were for, so much as how they amassed as an image and evoked a generalized idea of plentitude, surplus and affluence. Sameness overrules the mystique or aura any individual thing may have within the strata of an *Accumulation*.⁶⁹

Hamilton therefore importantly signals that while Arman's *Le Murex* seems to celebrate industrial innovation, it does so by overriding 'the mystique of individualism' through its mere abundance. According to Hamilton, with the works' accumulation of identical products comes the ability to erase individuality and to discover an essential shift in the line of questioning for artists working in response to mass production. That is, there is a shift from considering the serial phenomena of mass production in relationship to the horrors of World War II to examining the network of relationships between individual objects and the commodity, and, more abstractly, between the individual and a working collective.

It is through this lens that we can now return to *Poly Wheel*'s serial composition. Like Arman's *Le Murex*, *Poly Wheel* is a sculpture that serially mimics mass production, erasing individual products with a mirage of identical parts working together as a collection – as a collective. However, unlike *Accumulations*, *Poly Wheel* does not glamorise the commodity. The Robin Day Q Stak frames that make up *Poly Wheel* are commodities frozen at a particular point in production. The 212 chairs are unfinished bare steel frames without the plastic shell. They are a frame without a function.

Brisley described the process of thinking through the making of *Poly Wheel*: 'I got very much involved in the process of the work being its own subject – the work should actually reveal through its process the way in which it was made'.⁷⁰ Here, 'work' refers to the work being done on the Haverhill metal polishing floor, the collective labour of workers polishing steel chair frames on the shop floor. *Poly Wheel* is serial in the formal sense of the proliferation of mass-produced objects such as the Robin Day chair. But it is also serial in terms of labour collectivity. In Brisley's view, 'the work' was its own subject and product. *Poly Wheel*'s unfinished commodities are entangled with the dynamic conditions of their creation. It is a view of seriality that is compositionally like Arman's *Le Murex* but conceptually borrows from Burgin in using the empty chair to signify larger bureaucratic structures. Navigating the polarities of the Nouveau Réalistes' glamorisation of factory production and conceptual art's critique of bureaucratic structures, Brisley's use of seriality can be thought of more accurately as the unbound seriality described in Benedict Anderson's seminal text *Spectre of Comparisons* (1998).⁷¹ In the context of Brisley's placement,

the serial nature of mass production could indeed be said to be unbound as ‘a self-identified collective body’. If Arman’s *Accumulations* worked to erase individuality, *Poly Wheel* does not aim to heroise the lonely office chairs of conceptual art or to restore each empty referent with a human body, but to recognise the unbounded collective that facilitates the modes of production. Each individual chair of *Poly Wheel*, like each individual worker on the shop floor, is directed by the cycles of the conveyor belt.

Brisley describes his work’s intention: ‘The individual in relation to groups of people and also in relation to social division is what I am very conscious of in all that I do’.⁷² The social divisions Brisley refers to are the hierarchical divisions of class within Britain’s social body. However, like the individual chairs that make up *Poly Wheel*, Brisley does not interpret class structure as solidified bodies. His exploration of the collectivity of class, as within the APG and Hille, is an investigation rooted in antagonisms: between the individual and class collectivity, and, perhaps more significantly, within the individual body’s split attention between itself and its potential for collective power.

The Morbid Symptoms of Capitalist Culture

The same year as the start of his placement with Hille, Brisley performed a work titled *Celebration for Institutional Consumption* (1970) at the Brighton Festival. The performance simulated a dinner party, featuring a white table, white chairs, and intentionally Caucasian guests in a vacant industrial space. Above the table, suspended by a metal frame, was a metal cage in which a ‘figure’ was contained. Throughout the duration of the ‘dinner party’, a ‘controller’ entered the cage and cut away part of the figure. The largely symbolic act of cutting the caged figure simulates actual violence to the body. An excerpt from the event script reads: ‘Controller climbs into cage, cuts into anonymous figure – intestines begin to hang down from the figure. Controller climbs down’.⁷³ In the performance proposal (1970), Brisley describes this as ‘the individual disintegrates’. As the event progresses, the interactions between the ‘controller’ and ‘figure’ grow increasingly absurd while dinner guests eat and read from a script without noticing what is going on above them (Fig. 6).⁷⁴ In the proposal, Brisley explains the sequence of actions:

the people eating, talking, singing and dancing represent the imperfect state of human life. The disintegrating figure above demonstrates active destructive forces at work, but eventually the disintegration is carried far enough to reveal the only complete human being present. This figure represents a full human potential.⁷⁵

In summary, Brisley intended to expose the fact that the diners, like most individuals in their daily lives, did not recognise the convention in which they were operating, in this case, that of a dinner party. The cutting away of the figure suspended above physically and symbolically performed the disintegrating potential inherent in each individual to be freed from the de-politicisation of institutionalised collective behaviour. Brisley’s ‘full human’ was not a vision for a utopic future, but rather a collection of alienated limbs.

Two years later, in a performance titled *You Know It Makes Sense* (1972) at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, the dinner party’s gluttony of private consumption was replaced with the public political consumption of the body politic (Fig. 7).⁷⁶ *You Know It Makes Sense* is composed of multiple scenes featuring figures and objects entangled in precarious positions. One of these scenarios presents a raised wheelchair half submerged in the gallery wall. At its feet is a figure bound

72. Brisley, ‘National Life Stories’, p. 165.

73. Stuart Brisley, *Celebration for Institutional Consumption*, script, 1970 Stuart Brisley Archive, London, UK, p. 2.

74. Stuart Brisley, *Celebration*, p. 1.

75. Stuart Brisley, *Celebration*, p. 1.

76. Stuart Brisley, *You Know It Makes Sense*, 1972, performance, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. Copyright Stuart Brisley.

77. Stuart Brisley, 'You Know It Makes Sense – Press Release 1972', Stuart Brisley Archive, London, UK.



Fig. 6. Stuart Brisley, *Celebration for Institutional Consumption*, Event, 1970, Brighton Festival. Copyright Stuart Brisley.

with wire and splashed with white paint. Surrounding the scene are scattered pieces of paper.

These performative vignettes were intended to reference the contemporary accusations of torture made by the *Irish Times* (1972) against the British army under Prime Minister Edward Heath. Playing upon the word accusation, Brisley made the installation a psychological environment, an atmosphere where torture was not physically carried out but with the relationship created between objects and figures suggesting the possibility. The work uses anticipation and expectation to critically question how crimes against humanity are processed in the media and subsequently sold as a commodity to our social imaginations. The title *You Know It Makes Sense* refers to a political slogan used by Harold Wilson's Labour Party government, 1964–1970. Brisley states that the title, like most political slogans, should be viewed as an advertisement and/or a 'commercial sell'.⁷⁷ By



Fig. 7. Stuart Brisley, *You Know It Makes Sense*, 1972, performance, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. Copyright Stuart Brisley.

linking the political commodity to the possibility of actual acts of political violence, the repressed repercussions of the reality of torture come to light. Brisley inextricably entangles the state of the physical body with the consumption of the body politic.

These two works amongst many others performed by Brisley during the early 1970s are described in John Robert's Stuart Brisley artist biography as tackling the 'morbid symptoms of capitalist culture'.⁷⁸ Those symptoms were conveyed by a multi-sensory environment that included objects, people, and materials. In an interview in 2005, Brisley states that in his event-based work he considered the varied elements in his work as equal players in building a Constructivist vision of a total environment.⁷⁹

Within this constructed environment, Brisley considered the different mediums of his performances as exploiting the points of tension within political, social, and economic unity. His vision for performance made palpable the antagonism of the individual and class system within the body politic, not just as a

78. Roberts, John. [www.groveart.com "Stuart Brisley: Artist biography"]. Oxford University Press, New York.

79. Brisley, 'National Life Stories', pp. 164–5. Also described in Interview with the author, Spring 2017.

80. Brisley, 'National Life Stories', pp. 164–5, Spring 2017.

81. Stuart Brisley, *ZL 65 6395 C*, the Tate Gallery 1980–1982. Illustrated catalogue of acquisitions, London, 1984.

82. Brisley, *ZL 65 6395 C*.

83. Brisley, 'National Life Stories', p. 166.

conceptual division of the self but also as a violent fragmentation of the body. As Brisley put it:

It wasn't a protest against bureaucracy as such, it was really much more a protest against conspicuous individualism, which is another kind of conformity, which is more difficult to combat and totalitarian in its effect. I thought of the use of my own body as being like a figure, a human figure but not necessarily a specific person.⁸⁰

In these performances, the brutal manipulation of the body is direct and confrontational but also abstracted, drawing on the visceral commonality of all bodies that connects the different flows of paint, paper, and objects.

Not Achieved

One year after Brisley's placement with Hille, he performed his first solo work, titled *ZL 65 6395 C*, at Gallery House, London (April–May 1972). The title was Brisley's social insurance number. As part of the performance, Brisley legally changed his name to this number for seventeen days and nights. *ZL 65 6395 C* required two rooms, one for Brisley's performance and one for the audience. The audience area was an old medical waiting room. One wall of the room had a slot in which visitors could take turns viewing Brisley's performance. However, the partial view was further obstructed by a monitor that displayed a video of a beating heart. Above the slot was written 'No Reason'. Throughout the performance Brisley, in contrast to the Robin Day Chairs, used a wheelchair, water, black paint, and flour to change the appearance of his room. He slept in the room to give the illusion that he was always working. However, one hour before the work was intended to end, Brisley knocked down the wall that separated him from the audience. At this moment, Brisley said he considered the work to be a failure. He wrote on the wall of his room 'Not Achieved' (Fig. 8).⁸¹

ZL 65 6395 C addressed the problem of an artist trying to critically question individualism through a medium that is defined by individual ego. Like in his previous work, Brisley states that he wanted to 'reduce his personality to create a situation where all the materials (including himself) used in making the work were given the same value'.⁸² The reduction of personality was taken to the extreme in *ZL 65 6395 C* when Brisley chose to legally replace his name with his social security number. In Brisley's words, 'I thought of the use of my own body as being like a figure, a human figure but not necessarily a specific person'.⁸³ By replacing his name with a government number, Brisley sought to abstract his own identity to a state of anonymity; an abstraction that relegated his figure to nothing more than another element of composition or a unit in a collective effort to create. However, unlike the Bauhaus's bringing together of different mediums, the decision to use his social security number indicates that Brisley was not freed by anonymity, but instead mediated by larger institutional structures. After all, the social security number, *ZL 65 6395 C*, can just as easily be read as a product number, so that the individual, like the commodity, is abstracted to the point of political neutrality. *ZL 65 6395 C*'s compositional fate, according to Brisley's pessimistic evaluation, was the fate of collective agency, summarised by the writing on the wall ... 'Not Achieved'.

A Lack of Representation

After the Hornsey Sit-In (1968), Brisley claimed to have given up on collective agency. That same year, he burned César's foam sculpture on the gates of the Tate. When considered together, these two separate events elicit a tenuous connection between mass production, institutional structures, and the failure of collective



84. Interview with the author, Spring 2017.

Fig. 8. Stuart Brisley, ZL 656395 C, 1972, performance, Gallery House, London. Copyright Stuart Brisley.

action. From the ashes of César's plastic foam, Brisley's performances make visible the 'morbid symptoms of capitalist culture' as internalised, normalised, and entrenched within the individual psyche and embodied within institutional rituals. Yet, while *Celebration for Institutional Consumption* (1970) and *You Know It Makes Sense* (1972) spectacularise these symptoms through acting out or implying direct violence to the physical body, in contrast, *Poly Wheel*, like ZL 65 6395 C, was more subtle in inflicting the violence of loss of identity.

Brisley reflects that he pursued the Hille placement in order to examine the relationship between the individual and the working class, or, perhaps more importantly, to find the individual within the working class.⁸⁴ This mission

85. Brisley, 'Hille Fellowship'.

86. Stuart Brisley, 'Annotated Typed Document About Artists' Unions', date unknown, Tate Archive, London, UK, p. 1.

87. Brisley, 'Report on APG Project'.

88. Brisley, 'National Life Stories', p. 167.

was arguably rooted in a particularly British understanding of the relationship between design and labour dating back to the Arts and Crafts movement's response to the Industrial Revolution, a relationship that sought to re-insert creative and ethical ways of working as a collective through cooperative individualism. But the problems of mass production addressed by John Ruskin and Robert Morris had changed. World War II post-war design, informed by systems theory, had not only commoditised the cultural object but expanded to systems of objects. The Robin Day chair was no longer a singular cultural symbol of progress but part of a collective of corporate spatial efficiency. In other words, it was no longer the singular commodity but a commoditised collective of objects that defined corporate life.

In the aftermath of World War II's post-war consumption and the evolution of labour practices, Brisley's work was arguably not interested in rescuing collective labour and subsequently collective agency. Instead, reflecting his critical role within the APG, he sought to reveal the failure of cooperative individualism and indeed the commodification of the collective itself. Returning to *Poly Wheel*, the circle of 212 chairs looks as though it was made without the workers' labour. If left untouched, Brisley observed, the conveyor belt alone could create this same circle. If Brisley and the workers' labour simulate the conveyor belts' method of production, the individual chair frames, unit by unit, create a metonymy of their collectivity. Yet, frozen in their unfinished state, the chair frames are simultaneously alienated from the workers who made them and alternatively an unsellable product; stuck in the process of production, they are collectively a vacant referent.

In his essay 'Hille Fellowship – Factory and Artist: The Industrial Context' (1970), Brisley addressed the Hille workers' perspective on their own collective identity. He describes their attitude as one of 'protectionism'.⁸⁵ The Hille employees argued that the unions were responsible for securing fair rewards for labour completed, while at the same time they lamented that their loyalty towards Unions had become strained. As Brisley noted, where 'in the past Unions have generally affiliated to the labour party and to the TUC', 'because of the record of the present labour movement' there was 'pressure inside the unions to either disaffiliate or to withhold funds'.⁸⁶

The unions' longstanding trust in the Labour party was belied by accusations of its mishandling of industry and industrial relations. Such government documents as 'In Place of Strife' (1969) created a growing demand by workers to disaffiliate unions from the Labour party. Brisley ascribes the workers' declining morale to a political disenchantment, an overall disillusionment, and a 'feeling of a lack of representation' from either the Labour or Conservative parties.⁸⁷ Brisley concludes: 'In Britain at that time, there were more human references ... than the body present'.⁸⁸