An Interview with Mark Wallinger

YVE-ALAIN BOIS, GUY BRETT, MARGARET IVERSEN,
AND JULIAN STALLABRASS

The following discussion with the British artist Mark Wallinger, which took place in his London flat on June 3, 2007, essentially focuses on *State Britain*, his eight-month installation at Tate Britain.[1]

The excellent press release provided by the museum deserves to be quoted in full:

> Mark Wallinger has recreated peace campaigner Brian Haw's Parliament Square protest for a dramatic new installation at Tate Britain. Running along the full length of the Duveen Galleries, *State Britain* consists of a meticulous reconstruction of over 600 weather-beaten banners, photographs, peace flags and messages from well-wishers that have been amassed by Haw over the past five years.
>
> Faithful in every detail, each section of Brian Haw's peace camp from the makeshift tarpaulin shelter and tea-making area to the profusion of hand-painted placards and teddy bears wearing peace-slogan t-shirts has been painstakingly sourced and replicated for the display.
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> Brian Haw began his protest against the economic sanction in Iraq in June 2001, and has remained opposite the Palace of Westminster ever since. On 23 May 2006, following the passing by Parliament of the "Serious Organised Crime and Police Act" prohibiting unauthorised demonstrations within a one kilometer radius of Parliament Square, the majority of Haw's protest was removed. Taken literally, the edge of this exclusion zone bisects Tate Britain. Wallinger has marked a line on the floor of the galleries throughout the building, positioning *State Britain* half inside and half outside the border.
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> In bringing a reconstruction of Haw's protest before curtailment back into the public domain, Wallinger raises challenging questions about issues of freedom of expression and the erosion of civil liberties in Britain today.

1. *State Britain* opened on January 15 and remained on view until August 27, 2007.

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What this sober release does not convey, however, is the graphic violence of the many photographs included in Haw's "assemblage" and dutifully reproduced, fading and all, in Wallinger's replica. Nor, as a consequence, does it convey the emotional effect this installation might have had on beholders walking through the Duveen Galleries—normally affected to British sculpture—on their way to admire Tate Britain's trove of Turners. Although Haw began his protest long before the invasion of Iraq (he was initially addressing the effect of economic sanctions on Iraq's population, particularly on children), the violence he exposed and denounced became even more horrific after the start of the war—and the images he displayed even more stunning, given the general self-censorship of the mass media.[2]

Brian Haw's protest. 2006. Photographs by Mark Wallinger.

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Julian Stallabrass: Let's begin with *State Britain*, now on show at Tate Britain. I know you have talked about it as a kind of memorial or an elegy to Brian Haw's antiwar manifestation outside the Houses of Parliament, most of which was removed by the police. In the Tate literature too—I don't know how much of a hand you had in that—it is quite clearly presented as being a work of art about protest rather than a reenactment of that protest. How do you see the politics of that work?

Mark Wallinger: There was the necessity of making the publication prior to seeing how the work actually manifested itself, so all those things changed a great deal in the process. I'd been photographing Brian's display for quite a while

2. For a more detailed analysis of *State Britain*, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Piece Movement," *Artforum* 45, no. 8 (April 2007), pp. 248–51. For more information about Haw's protest, see http://www.parliament-square.org.uk.

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and then last April 26 I was approached to come up with an idea for something for the Duveen Galleries . . .

Yve-Alain Bois: So you started documenting Brian Haw's stuff even before knowing that you'd have a show in the Duveen Galleries?

Wallinger: Yeah, just because I thought it was a remarkable thing that Brian was doing there, and because once you take the trouble to cross the road it's an important thing to see. So I was approached at the end of April, together with a couple of other artists, for something the following January, which is not an awful lot of time [to put on a show]. Then on May 6 the police introduced some new conditions on Brian's protest, so there was a bit more urgency in terms of doing something with his work. I took six-hundred-odd digital photographs on Thursday, May 18; on May 22, I took two directors from the Tate to the square and said, "Well, I'm thinking of doing this" and pointed, and one of them said, "What, Churchill?"[3] [*Laughs*.] No, not really. . . . And then that very night, seventy-eight policemen arrived to take it all away. So once that happened, then the complexities of remaking the thing—I mean, it was a real process—were kind of exchanged for the imperative of showing something that had been written off by the police. At the same time, the piece was discussed in terms of something that ought not to frighten too many people at the Tate. So if the museum's literature gets a bit cagey or cute on the politics of reproducing it, partly it was due to that. They gave me their backing from the very beginning, but really no one other than Clarrie Wallis, my curator on it, had seen it at all until it arrived in January. Plus at the same time, for sort of maximum impact and for protecting Brian as much as anything, we had to keep the thing quiet until the whole thing opened. So that was quite stressful and strange—it was like nothing else I'd ever worked on, in those terms.

Stallabrass: Protecting Brian in the sense that if it was thought that he had a hand in this . . . ?

Wallinger: Yeah, and then he'd get a different kind of harassment from the police perhaps. It had to be presented as a sort of fait accompli. And also, in the meantime, we didn't know what would happen to him and how the case against him would progress.

Bois: What about the fact that he won the right to go back to Parliament Square, a few weeks after the opening—did the show play a role in that?

Wallinger: He appeared at the magistrates' court a week after the police took all his stuff away and his counsel argued that the police action was beyond the remit of the law. Then it was actually a week after the exhibition opened that the judge, Quentin Purdy, in summing up the case, said that the law was Orwellian, that the conditions that the police placed on him were unworkable

3. A well-known sculpture of Churchill by Ivor Roberts-Jones, dating from 1973, stands in Parliament Square.

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and unreasonable. The best that Purdy could do to show his disapproval of the untrammeled powers given to the police to curtail protest was to insist that permission could only be granted or refused by Sir Ian Blair, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. Purdy conceded it wasn't within the authority of the court to reinstate all the stuff that had been removed, even though Brian had won the moral argument. The police then handed in a demand for seizure of Brian's belongings signed by Sir Ian Blair.

The point is that the government has ceded all powers and conditions for protest to the police. In a democracy!

Bois: Just to clarify, and this is a question we should have asked right from the beginning: how did you get to know Brian Haw? Because you didn't know him before you started, obviously.

Wallinger: No. Brian likes telling the story because the first thing he said to me was "Piss off!" when I went to introduce myself to him, and obviously with the amount of people that come up to him everyday, he doesn't waste his message on everyone, you know. Plus I think a few times when he's been talking to journalists he ended up quite unhappy with the outcome . . . and so he's quite circumspect about whom he's speaking to. But when I outlined my idea to see what he thought about it and he was, you know, very much with the project the whole way through, and then I went back—

Bois: But that's when you already knew you were going to do that thing in the Tate?

Wallinger: Well, actually I think it was the day after the stuff got taken away that I spoke to him, which was the day after I proposed my idea to the curators, so that was at about the same time as when they were talking to the people higher up at the Tate about whether this was an idea they wanted realized.

Bois: Let's go back for a moment to the issue of duplication, of producing a kind of elaborate fake readymade destined for a museum context. The curators emphasize that aspect, and the implied craft, but the fact is that when you see the work, you don't think of that, all you think about are those horrible photographs of the victims of the sanctions and the war.

Wallinger: To be honest, the urgency for people to see this thing overrides any kind of sophisticated argument for, or about, the nature of something remade in that much detail and then how it exists in a gallery. But I think there is something about that and that kind of extreme verisimilitude that is a bit boggling to the eye and mind, and that slows down people's reactions a bit as to how those things are . . .

Stallabrass: Why was that verisimilitude so important to you, the weathering, the urine bucket, the whole thing? It's not just about the images is it?

Wallinger: No, but I think it is about authenticity. I'm doing something for Münster Sculpture Projects at the moment. Münster was bombed in retaliation for the bombing of Coventry, and they chose to remake the heart of the city, so there is an ersatz city center that kind of does something to the pit of

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Mark Wallinger. State Britain. *2007. © 2008 Mark Wallinger. Courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery. Photograph by Dave Morgan.*

your stomach about history and how it's reconfigured. I think with Brian's thing it is important because generally it's only when the things that have been destroyed are of accepted worth that they are remade with such precise and thoroughgoing means. I think this deserves the same treatment, and because it was such a clean sort of raid, if you like, on the night of May 22, then that was like a frozen moment in time, and that does necessarily seem a little bit elegiac of some kind of freedom.

Stallabrass: Could you talk a bit about the dissemination of the images outside the Tate, in print, for example, because it seems as if copyright issues were so much in the forefront of the institution's mind that they closed down the distribution of the work. When the show opened the Tate's PR people were directing photographers away from photographing parts of the installation, and of the illustrations you see of it, even online, there's one shot in particular that dominates, one of you in front of it. It seems to me that the dissemination of the piece outside of the museum is being stifled quite a bit by these copyright issues.

Wallinger: To be honest, we secured copyright and permission on everything apart from Reuters, so those were the only things that people were directed away from. We chose to have those in there anyway and see what the consequences were, so really the press was free to go away with the images and write after

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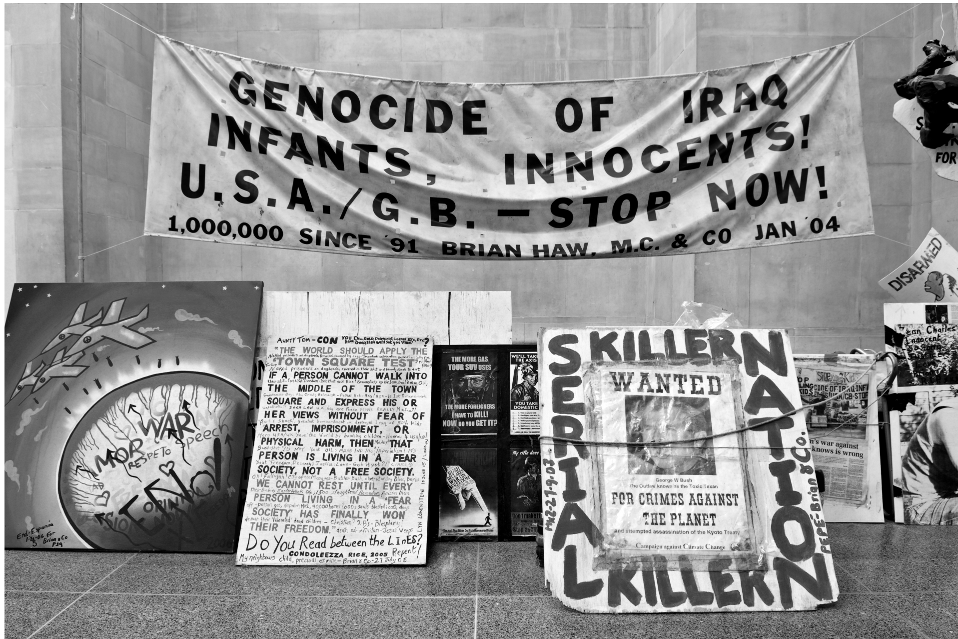

that, so I think that what's going on is self-censorship. Jon Snow was there talking about what's been happening in Iraq and that kind of self-censorship and the fact that there's a watershed for certain images inevitably leads to self-censorship because the journalists know that certain images will not be broadcast, so now the cameramen themselves almost look away because they know that stuff's not going to go out.[4]

Bois: About self-censorship, one of the things that surprised me the most, living in America, is, on the contrary, the relative absence of it in the case of your work being shown in Tate Britain. What place in America would show this? You might think that since everything is cynically transformed into spectacle, quite a few institutions could host such a show, but there is still a moment of resistance in the system. The fact is, a museum director or curator can hardly pretend to be indifferent to what is shown in the case of the images included in *State Britain*, the usual "we've got to show everything new and hip" position can't really be used to fend off prowar critics. For these images do have a huge effect on the people who see them for the first time because they don't see them in the press, they don't see this raw carnage on TV. You do see people stopping in the Duveen Galleries, as if they have received a punch in the stomach—every day, every time I saw it. It does arrest people.

4. Jon Snow is a news anchor and foreign correspondent for Channel 4 of British TV, with a specialist's knowledge of Iran and Iraq.

Above and facing page: Wallinger. State Britain. *2007. © 2008 Mark Wallinger. Courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery. Photographs by Dave Morgan.*

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Wallinger: Particularly the children, the slaughter of the innocents and the images of children born disfigured as a result of depleted uranium left from the first Gulf War, because those images show the consequences of our actions as a nation, of our invading another country, and make it impossible to think that Iraq would welcome another such invading force.

But in terms of self-censorship, well, this is kind of what also happens with this new law—against protesting without authorization—that really reduces all dissent into a sort of general grievance against the government.[5] The law is so messily framed that the default safety mode is that you don't bother to protest, and so that is almost analogous to what happens with the news from Iraq.

Stallabrass: Yve-Alain was asking, "Where in the States would you see this?," which is a very interesting question. Yet, before you did it, we would have asked the same thing in the U.K., I think—and it would seem that the Tate would have been the last place. So I was wondering about the political timing of that, whether that's to do with the fag end of the Blair era, whether the Tate felt they had a bit more leeway to make such a gesture—or, rather, allow you to make it. I just wondered whether you had any sense of that, or of what that institution was thinking about?

5. The 2006 Serious Organised Crime and Police Act has also been used to prosecute those reading out the names of Iraqi war dead at the Cenotaph.

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Wallinger: Well, I think that you've got to be impressed with them. I mean, I should say as well that there was a campaign to save a Turner watercolor, *The Blue Rigi*, which was successful, and they got Tony Blair to come along and say a few words about it, and rather than take him in the side entrance to get him in front of the Turner quickly and efficiently, Nick Serota walked him along the whole length of the Duveen, and rumor has it that Blair muttered, "I thought we got rid of all this." So, fair play, I would say. People will then say there's a consensus by now, obviously, that the war was a disaster, but all the same I think it was brave of them. And I was sort of surprised because they were pretty cautious when they removed a work from John Latham's show.[6] So for lots of reasons I was kind of surprised.

Margaret Iversen: Now, one has to admit that Brian Haw's construction is heroic, wonderful, and *wacky*, and that strangeness is kind of glossed over if you see it as a perfectly straightforward protest against the war. There is certainly a good deal of Christian evangelism at work in it and imagery like crosses and candles. There is also its insistence on dead babies that seems to me like an unconscious repetition of the trope of the massacre of the innocents. For your everyday Leftie antiwar campaigner, it is all a bit off-message, wouldn't you say? Yet what makes it so compelling as a work of art is precisely this out-of-control excess.

Wallinger: Well yeah, I think he's . . . I saw him yesterday and someone came up with a new placard for him that said, "Gordon Brown: same shit, different arsehole," and Brian just said to me, "It should be the other way around: different arsehole, same shit." So you see, he's very acute. It's a syntactical kind of clumsiness. The piece is quite "encyclopedic," in a way, and I love the way it goes from the list of how every MP voted and debated the war to dreadful puns having to do with Blair. That seems to me to make it much more human and personal.

Stallabrass: And, with all its contributions from the public, it's a collective piece in a certain sense?

Wallinger: Yes, indeed. People brought images and stuff to him over the course of five or six years, at least. I mean, he was there two years before the war broke out, so a lot of the images and information are about the aftereffects of the Gulf War and subsequent sanctions policy, and the other thing I should say is that with his bed there, the whole thing is a nightmare that he actually lives through everyday. There's something colossal about someone who can actually bear to think about all that all the time. Psychologically, I think that has an impact, the idea that he wakes up and it's still the same horror around him. It's almost like he's encamped somewhere in very hostile territory with only a few supporters.

6. In 2005, Tate Britain canceled plans to display John Latham's work *God Is Great*, lest it give offense to Muslims.

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Iversen: I think you're right: it is a dead serious protest against the war. Yet it is also a manifestation of that raw collective emotional response one saw after Diana's death with all its sheer sentimentality, not to mention the accumulation of flowers and teddy bears. So as a political protest, it was already complex. But then I think that your appropriation of it makes it even more multilayered. It has to be seen in the context of the history of installation art and site-specificity, the readymade and so on. Some people have compared it to Thomas Hirschhorn's altars and kiosks, but those were usually and pointedly outside the museum. It is not so much the simulation as the spatial displacement that is crucial. You've re-created something that was outside and sited it in the museum, turning the tables by making the museum shelter something that was outlawed and destroyed.

Wallinger: Yeah, and that was something that was hard to predict, how that would turn out. I mean, when I was first approached, I did start thinking about the Tate's history and the fact that there was a penitentiary there and that kind of thing, and then Tate money, its links to the former slave trade, and the implications of that and how the "neoclassical" architecture was this magic wand that makes all these associations disappear into something high-minded. When the pieces first came in, they were all on sixteen palettes and unwrapping them and putting them in the space was very strange and someone said that it was a bit like Harvest Festival at a church because they did feel very humble and vulnerable . . .

Bois: Let's go back to Maggie's remark, to the fact that the impact of your piece is multiplied because it is in a museum, because it contains things the public would not normally see in such a place. That is, to go and see a very, very interesting antiwar piece in a gallery in Chelsea or whatever, is not the same—

Stallabrass: It's remarkable these days that you can go into a very wealthy commercial gallery to see installation works which use the same material that you use—Iraq atrocity photographs, and so on—and you're expected to admire these things aesthetically, buy them, and hang them on a wall. That is a rather extraordinary context.

Bois: Your piece, by contrast, touched people who had come to see Stubbs or Turner. Do you see this as a model that can be reproduced in other ways, or is it by pure fluke that you were able to do that?

Wallinger: Yeah, well I suppose there was a good deal of serendipity attached to the project. To be honest, I can't remember the order in which it struck me but pretty early on, I realized that the kilometer exclusion zone must intersect the Tate Gallery and I went to Stanford's map shop to get them to print up a bespoke Ordnance Survey map at the biggest scale possible, and I remember the mounting excitement when the curator and the chief technician were working out that this would actually go right through the octagon.

Bois: The curator was also excited?

Wallinger: Oh yeah . . . [*Laughs.*]

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Iversen: I did read some small print that no law had been broken, you know, in the Tate literature, so there's a little bit of waffle . . .

Wallinger: As far as the Tate's lawyers could determine, the museum, although a public building, does not constitute public space. But clarity has no part in this law. In the publication accompanying the exhibition we publish some of the answers given to various queries about the law, suggesting that the ordinary citizen might need specialized legal advice to determine how an act of protest or a work of art or simply naming the war dead in front of the Cenotaph might constitute an offense liable to arrest and prosecution within the one kilometer exclusion zone. So it was wonderful just to get the line drawn through all the galleries, because immediately you draw a line and make links between this and that, unbelievable associations arise and that again points out the absurdity of creating such a threshold. *State Britain* straddles this line.

Iversen: But it's got to be preserved, you know; the Tate should buy it, obviously. [*Laughs*.]

Wallinger: Yeah, I know, well it's kind of out of my hands a little bit—

Stallabrass: You said in an interview that Brian Haws sits in a line or maybe even a tradition of British, radical, political, religious dissent?

Wallinger: Well, I think perhaps so, I think what's been interesting is that people rushed very quickly to call him eccentric and his protest an eyesore. *The Guardian*, a newspaper that should have known better, dismissed it.

Iversen: Maybe it's a bit different now? Maybe thanks to your piece, he is being taken a bit more seriously? There has been a lot of press around *State Britain*. Perhaps that is one way its message has been disseminated. The scandal gave it considerable public prominence. Another piece of yours that got a lot of press coverage was *Ecce Homo*, another case of figuring an ancient trope: Christ before the mob.[7]

Wallinger: Well, it's one man standing alone against the world, isn't it?

Iversen: And in that moment, he is a political prisoner.

Wallinger: Yes indeed, so this rush to judge or blame or condemn is, yeah . . .

Guy Brett: It didn't look like an artist's work—it just appeared there, suddenly—especially if one compares it with the other temporary works that were made for that plinth, for obvious reasons.[8]

Wallinger: Yeah, I wanted a life-sized figure—a real person among the over-sized relics of empire. What was originally planned to stand on the top of this

7. According to Wallinger, "*Ecce Homo*, a life-size figure of Christ before the multitude, was conceived for the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square in London, where it was installed from July 1999 to February 2000, the period of the passing of the Millennium. The figure stood towards the front edge of the plinth, gazing down across the square, his hands tied together behind him . . ." (*Mark Wallinger: Easter*, exh. cat. [Milan: Hangar Bicocca, 2005], p. 16). The sculpture, cast in white marbleized resin (and with a crown made of gold-plated barbed wire), was one of a series of art works commissioned to stand on the plinth. The sculpture's mold was made from a young beardless man, which broke with the usual Christian imagery.

8. The other works that followed Wallinger's 1999 *Ecce Homo* were Bill Woodrow's *Regardless of History* (2000) and Rachel Whiteread's *Monument* (2001).

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Wallinger. Ecce Homo. *1999. © 2008 Mark Wallinger. Courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery. Photograph by John Riddy.*

column was an equestrian statue of William the Fourth but he didn't leave enough money in his will [*Laughs.*]—so that's why it's been empty ever since . . .

Stallabrass: There has been an explicitly religious strand running through your work, at least since *Angel*, if not before.[9] In terms of the reception of your work, one can read lavish praise for it in the right-wing press, in the *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, in terms of its serious engagement with religion. You've also had figures like Benjamin Buchloh laying into you for making work that has a largely mystical effect over viewers, analogous to that produced by Bill Viola.[10] That's not the way I would think of your work, but I was wondering if you could talk about, first, what draws you into this material, and also how you think you handle the dangers of being seen as that kind of character?

Wallinger: Well, let's take the example of *Threshold to the Kingdom*.[11] This was made in answer to a commission for the Jubilee Year by the British School in

9. In *Angel*, a 7-minute, 30-second video loop, Wallinger is filmed as a blind man (dark glasses, white stick) walking towards us (but remaining on the spot) on the bottom step of an ascending escalator in the Angel station of the London subway while reciting the beginning of St. John's Gospel ("In the beginning was the word . . . "). Two other escalators flank him: on his right side people are going down, on his left they are going up—but they are headed in the wrong direction (we see the back from those going down, and the front of those going up). The film runs in reverse, including the soundtrack, which accounts for the poor elocution of Wallinger, who is in character as an angel named "Blind Faith." At one point in the film he suddenly steps backwards and ascends to the sound of Handel's coronation anthem *Zadok the Priest*.

10. In his review of the 49th Venice Biennale, published in the September 2001 issue of *Artforum*, to Wallinger's chagrin, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh compares Wallinger's work to that of Bill Viola. Here is an excerpt of the passage in question: "Exhibition value—the condition of the secularized modernist work as fully emancipated from cult value and myth—has been replaced by spectacle value, a condition in which media control in everyday life is mimetically internalized and aggressively extended into those visual practices that had previously been defined as either exempt from or oppositional to mass-cultural regimes, and that now relapse into the most intense solicitation of mythical experience. Paradoxically, the more noisily this electronic apparatus voices its totalizing claims, the more it expectorates its retardataire humanist, if not outright mythical or religious, themes and messages, a fusion of which the American Bill Viola remains the undisputed master (with Mark Wallinger, the representative to the British pavilion, a close second)."

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Wallinger. Still from Threshold to the Kingdom. *2000. © 2008 Mark Wallinger. Courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery.*

Rome. I had a fear of flying, which I managed to overcome once I recognized it as a fear of airports. Being under scrutiny, at every point being processed, then existing in this weird no man's land before being spat out on to the official terra firma of the state. There's a sense of guilt and vulnerability, so one emerges with a real sense of relief. It is where we experience the power of the state at its most overt: we are being judged, which I realized was analogous to confession and absolution in the Roman Catholic Church . . . and that sense of one's freedom or the lack of it is very similar. . . .

Allegri's setting of the Fifty-First Psalm is a prayer for cleansing and forgiveness, and the music (once unique to the Sistine Chapel) is sublime in the sense that for me it is inexhaustible.

I had always resisted slow motion, but where replaying Viola in real time would reveal actors pulling faces, here it succeeded in "transfiguring" the mundane into something extraordinary. And *Threshold* has within it a materialist critique of religion because ultimately it records ordinary people trying to find their bearings at an airport. This kind of ambiguity is essential to all my work.

11. In *Threshold to the Kingdom*, an 11-minute, 20-second video filmed in slow motion, the camera is fixed on the door through which the passengers emerge from the custom control ready to leave the airport. Some are in groups, others alone; some are greeted by friends; most seem discombobulated yet slightly relieved. The camera is placed at a fair distance from the door, which keeps opening and closing, so that none of the people who are filmed are aware of its presence. This flattens the space and, with the sound of Allegri's *Miserere*, adds to the "unreality effect" of the slow motion.

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Ecce Homo was to be the first commission on the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square—also made with the millennium in mind. The square is and has been for centuries the place of protest and celebration—public meetings and public execution. As such, to have Christ before the multitude was to implicate us, the people in the square. Arresting the story at this moment, he can be regarded as a political prisoner—whether or not he thinks he's the son of God or if you see him as a religious leader or not, he's someone that has been betrayed. We are all responsible—looking at him, what singles you out from the crowd? From the mob? How would you react? The work was conceived after Bosnia and Kosovo—how could genocide happen again in Europe while we looked on?—and so that's why he's shorn of hair, that's the kind of the humiliation they doled out during ethnic cleansing—its what the Nazis did to the Jews. . . .

I wanted a Christ that was both contemporary and kind of classical. I was trying to find a language that could be for that moment but also have a proper weight—gravitas. He has his eyes shut because this is the moment where Christ is facing up to his destiny.

Bois: I guess we are all wondering, what is the purpose of the religious strain in your work?

Wallinger: It's a way of me thinking about the post–Cold War [condition], what were going to be the points of contention, what was going to be contested and disputed in the world. Since the revolution in Iran, which was probably the world's first backward revolution, if you like, I thought it was important to cover exactly the kind of things that, despite being brought up in a Western European democracy, are based on values and assumptions that are very much Christian. So, just for my own sake as much as anything, I kept wondering what were the rewards as well as the traps of thinking about God?

Stallabrass: In a different sense, if one thinks back to the days of "Young British Art," while you've always been successful in pursuing your work, nevertheless you always seemed very distinct from most of that crowd with your serious examinations of politics, nationhood, and religion. Now your concerns with both radical politics and religion seem very prescient, I think, since the art world has changed to reflect those concerns. And, of course, the change is not just in the art world but in much broader debates about, say, the supposedly Christian character of Europe.

Iversen: Like should Turkey be allowed to join the E.U.?

Stallabrass: . . . and what Christian values really are, and indeed there are left-wing figures who are also reflecting on such issues, including Slavoj Žižek . . .

Wallinger: You know, funnily enough, *Threshold to the Kingdom* was shown in Salzburg last year prior to the European Union meeting, and [Dominique] de Villepin got up and made a speech that essentially said, "Don't let the Turks in." [*Laughs.*] That's kind of interesting.

Stallabrass: And, of course, there's also been a turn toward at least some engagement

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with radical politics in the art world, so this new work has caught up with and surrounded your practice, placing it in a different context, and I was wondering what you think about that?

Wallinger: I'm glad people are thinking about and engaging with these things, that's great. I mean, I know certain people who would be horrified by *Ecce Homo*, and have a very reactionary sort of take on it, and that kind of shocked me, again, because of the worthless exercise that the Millennium Dome was.[12] What a missed opportunity it was to talk seriously about religion and majority faith in this country and how we should live in London. There was a squeamishness on the part of the government to address the fact that the Millennium was not simply a number: it represented two thousand years of a particular supernatural belief.

Bois: Was *Ecce Homo* discussed by religious people? Did you have a dialogue with some of them?

Wallinger: I did meet the Bishop of Southwark . . .

Stallabrass: Was he sober?[13]

Wallinger: [*Laughs.*] Well, yes, he was in fact, and I met a man from St. Martin-in-the-Fields and a chaplain. I did meet theologians . . .

Bois: You asked to meet them or they asked to meet you?

Wallinger: No, they asked to meet me.

Bois: They were puzzled? Intrigued?

Wallinger: No, they very much liked the work and because their relationship with the work was straightforward in theological terms, for me it became a totally strange experience. I was speaking to this man and asking him how he came to be a minister, and he described how he had a vision that he was trapped in this huge ray of light. Well, that's not a conversation you have every day; you don't get the opportunity to ask these people how did they come to think that they had a personal relationship with God that they were sure enough to, you know, to preach to other people. I think that's rather interesting.

Bois: Do you have the same kind of intriguing conversations with workers at the museum? Does your radical political work function like that? Did you have such a strange, epiphanic conversation with people about it?

Wallinger: I've talked to the invigilators at the museum quite a lot and they have been incredibly supportive and perceptive about the work and I think enjoyed the very different and direct interaction with the public that the

12. In numerous texts and interviews, Wallinger has associated the public installation of *Ecce Homo* with the Millennium Dome. "As a spiritual focus," he has written of his statue, "it was an antidote to the empty celebrations of Mammon in the infamous Dome down in Greenwich (a mean time indeed). Audaciously, it really was what the Millennium was about. It also had a secular message for the crowd in the square. Democracy is about the rights of minorities to have free expression, not the majority to browbeat, marginalize, make a subject of pillory." *Easter*, p. 19.

13. Newspaper stories about a public display of drunkenness by the Bishop circulated in December 2006.

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work encouraged. And, of course, I have gotten to know Brian's supporters, who are left-wingers of the old school who go back a very long way, who read chapter and verse on, you know, human rights from before the war, and that kind of thing. There have only been three Members of Parliament who have spoken to Brian, so that's how desperately alone he is opposite that building. So there are a lot of people in there who I'd probably like to speak to.

Iversen: Don't you think that one of the consequences of the success of the piece is that people will have to change their minds about spectacle, and how it can be used or appropriated? In a way I think that Tate Britain has trumped Tate Modern—there has always been some competition between them—by having this spectacular installation that fills the Duveen Galleries, but which is also deeply moving and significant. There hasn't been anything like that in the Turbine Hall, has there? Carsten Höller's slides (*Test Site*, 2007) were fun and popular, but not exactly meaningful.

Brett: No. It's either the circus or pseudo-religiosity . . .

Iversen: Well, I rather like some of them. In Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (2003) kids lay on the floor under the lurid light of a huge fake sun like it was some real dystopic beach—it was like out of a film!

Wallinger: Like a beach at the end of the universe . . .

Iversen: Yeah, exactly. [*Laughs.*]

Bois: For me, it's just pure kitsch, the kitsch of the sublime.

Wallinger: Like a lava lamp. [*Laughter.*]

Brett: But it's also like a crass film set in other ways . . .

Iversen: Yeah, it's all done with smoke and mirrors. It's literally smoke and mirrors. Illusion and spectacle is what it is about.

Bois: You're interested in radical politics—but what do you see as the possibilities of intervening? What can an artist do? I suppose it's a nasty question, but can you say a word about this?

Wallinger: I think the most an artist can do is unpack the rhetoric of power, really. In the 1980s, there was this terrible mismatch between rather savage, monetarist policies and a kind of flag-waving atmosphere that went around the political broadcasts of the Conservative party, and I was living in Brixton at the time of the riots. Later, during the miners' strike there were miners who were picketing outside Collet's bookshop where I worked during that whole year and one I got to know quite well went to prison for breaking some arcane law about public assembly still on the statute book from the seventeenth century. But I thought at the time that the standard of satire wasn't sufficiently sophisticated enough to deal with the self-delusion and hypocrisy of Thatcherism.

With *State Britain*, I suppose that what is exceptional in this work is that I was given the opportunity to do something I was fully prepared to do and that kind of perfect timing doesn't really happen very often. It really was about something important and was further focused by police actions. Then

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the fact that the line was there intersecting the museum succeeded in radicalizing the institution by highlighting its purpose—it isn't just about it being spectacular or fun or interactive, or even educational, if you like. I mean, it just sort of bites back. All too often the way that the museum chooses to disseminate the stuff and the way that the media chooses to build it up can diminish the work: there's such a pressure on public-funded spaces today to explain and outreach and interact . . . that they've stopped being museums anymore.

Bois: Speaking about what you've just said, I am wondering what would the work have been if the demarcating line hadn't been there. If the work had been in the Turbine Hall, for example, it seems to be obvious that it would have had less effect. I mean, more people would have seen it probably, but I think in terms of its sheer visual trauma, in terms of one's encounter with it, it would have been diluted. On top of it the Turbine Hall has always been a kind of construction site between installations, and it takes around six months to install something, during all that time it is constantly messy . . . so it would have been far less visually disruptive.

Wallinger: I mean, it's situated between the ancient and modern, if you like, in the collection; it is a barricade—it goes through the pillars at either end of the Duveen Galleries in a way that would not be done aesthetically for anything else—it's a bit of an uncomfortable squeeze through one side of the octagon. There doesn't seem to be a right way of doing it, and visually it's still a bit of an affront—

Bois: If it would have been less of an affront in the Turbine Hall, I think it goes back to the efficacy of your work as something that deals with the rhetoric of power, a rhetoric that is crystal clear in the neoclassical architecture of Tate Britain, in the name "Duveen."

Stallabrass: It's a late imperial monument. I think the other thing about it is because, as you rightly say, museums are fixed on spectacle and outreach, you have made a work that in a sense plays to those factors but at the same time, in the way that media draws it in, uses them to undermine them—a form of artistic judo.

Bois: Maybe you're too young for this, but how do you see the relationship between let's say the current state of activism in the art world, which is probably a lot more visible here than in America, as opposed to the noisy activism during the uproar in America during the Vietnam War. There seems to be a very different mode now. The context seems to have thickened.

Wallinger: Yeah, that's a good point. I mean, there seems to be quiescence, you know, in the face of this war and a part of it is because we're not seeing the sort of atrocities that people saw in the Vietnam War. The ministers don't go and attend the funerals so that's not public. Basically it's not being covered in the way that Vietnam was, and at the same time I think there's almost this sense that "ok, we made a mistake going in there, don't keep banging on about it." I think there is a real sense of that; there's another car bombing in

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Baghdad, but you don't see the images, and the general attitude is "oh, it's horrible, please get on to the next thing and surely this can't still be at the top of the agenda." Now we've got twenty-four-hour news; back then, it was kind of hard, physically, to get the film back to show it on the news, but people did it. All you're left with now are a few people in the Green Zone and some Iraqi doctor with a camera or something, so I think it is simply the lack of imagery, the lack of proper reporting, and I think also perhaps in terms of the instability of the Middle East, it's a very much more complex arena than Vietnam was.

Bois: So, what you seem to be saying is that maybe artists do not want to do as much on war, or don't tend to do work because there's less interest in the public: is that it?

Wallinger: I think what happens as well is that becoming an artist has become a viable career since I've left art school, and I think maybe artists are greedier and more selfish . . .

Stallabrass: I think one of the big differences surely is the decline of the organized Left. At the time of Vietnam, there was a Left, and that Left was aligned with, in some respects at least, the resistance in Vietnam, whereas now not only do you not have an organized Left of any power but also the kind of Utopia on offer by Islamic extremists is extremely uncongenial to most people in the West. But in a way it's not the unavailability of imagery that is the problem, because you can go on the Net and find anything you want, but there is a great self-censorship by the mainstream media.

Bois: In America there is one particular institution that has changed since Vietnam, which is the army, in the sense that there is no draft, and that completely transformed the perception of the war. The army recruiters empty the urban ghettos or get would-be U.S. citizens and send those poor kids who would not get jobs otherwise, or would not become legal immigrants, to the battlefront. The middle class is not directly affected. As for the Net, it is an interesting phenomenon because it makes a sort of short circuit between privacy and public space—I mean, it's a public space but privately inhabited. You see it at home, it's even more isolating than TV—you don't look at your information on the computer with someone else, it's only you.

Stallabrass: But the Net is used for conversation and . . .

Bois: I know, on the one hand it gives you more information than ever; on the other hand, I think it's privatizing the public space.

Wallinger: People don't go to political meetings.

Brett: In spite of all that, though, we had the biggest demonstration ever in British history on the Iraq War.

Iversen: But look what happened?

Brett: Yes, but it was a first . . .

Wallinger: But the biggest protest since then has been about the ban on fox-hunting, and as far as parliamentary debate goes, there is a telling line from Brian's

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display: "seven hundred hours debating fox-hunting; seven hours on the war." I think there's still probably a lot of, you know, outright racism as well among all this. There's still the old formula that "five hundred die in a train crash in Chile, no Britons involved." When you add to this distance the fear of Islam and our culpability in the everyday horror . . .

Iversen: Analogies between the situation today and art and politics in the 1960s and '70s are inevitable—that moment is now seen as a political and artistic Golden age. With the market as powerful as it is today, I think artists are looking back to a moment when it wasn't so all-embracing, and reviving certain strategies. Sometimes it's a matter of literally looking, like for Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (Tacita Dean) or his *Partially Buried Woodshed* (Renée Green). Or survivors from that era, Martha Rosler and Nancy Spero, reprise their antiwar works. Mary Kelly recently did a re-creation of a feminist protest against the Miss World competition in 1971 outside the Royal Albert Hall with women wearing flashing lights on their bodies (*Flashing Nipple Remix*, 2005). It's as though artists are trying to excavate and revive those energies.

Stallabrass: This current work that reflects on past radicalism has to be done with a bittersweet, nostalgic, and elegiac air, to say that the old era of political protest and art combined is something that we can never regain access to.

Iversen: The '70s are our historical avant-garde. Maybe that's one way you could look at it.

Stallabrass: I wondered if you wanted to talk more about your political formation? You said a little bit before about it, about your work in a radical bookshop and the miners' strike, and so on. Are you or have you ever been a member of any party or other political organization? [*Laughter.*]

Wallinger: I worked in a left-wing bookshop after I left college. I was there from '81 to . . .

Stallabrass: Yes, I think I remember you there . . .

Bois: Where was this shop?

Wallinger: Collet's on the Charing Cross Road. Through the years of the Falklands War, the miners' strike, and the IRA bombing campaign. We had all these newspapers and journals on the Left—you couldn't believe the variety we had. And it was kind of a further education for me. The directors of Collet's were all Communists, the majority of the staff when I arrived there were SWP [Trotskyists] activists, and then it became a kind of microcosm of all the problems with the Left . . .

The management started bringing in party members on the staff but they weren't much good at bookselling, and then someone who is a friend of mine arrived and started producing these "Ostalgia" before the time, Soviet revolutionary T-shirts . . .

Bois: Stalinist?

Wallinger: Yeah, well the Bolshevik revolution onwards, and eventually that turned over more money than the books, and then the management became—

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whether they knew it or not, as it was happening—more and more Thatcherite and started employing out-of-work actors and people they could keep on a low wage, and then they got firebombed for stocking *The Satanic Verses*. Then, when the Soviet Union collapsed, so did the bookshop because it was getting a generous amount of money from them . . .

Brett: The founder died as well—it was a family . . .

Stallabrass: Were you one of these people that would stand back from all this fragmentation of the Left and see that as a problem, or were you moving toward the Trotskyite side, or did you have a kind of position of that sort?

Wallinger: No, I couldn't affiliate with any of those bodies actually, and I've never . . . well, I joined Surrey Cricket Club recently [*laughs*] but I've never joined a party—I don't think you can be a joiner as an artist. It was as an artist that I felt I should express my views. If I have something to say, then that's what my job is. I got my head kicked in by the National Front as well when I worked there, and that was because we stocked gay literature rather than for our Leftist affiliations.

Bois: Again, one of the most interesting things about *State Britain* is the way it deals with diffusion. How do you get the information circulated? Not only in art but also in politics, since there is now such gigantic censorship *and* self-censorship? I was thinking about artists working on video and stuff like that. For the moment, the diffusion seems to be quite stifled—the avenues are very limited: commercial galleries, museum shows—it's not a big diffusion. Maybe artists and political groups could get together and buy TV time on some cultural channel? This was actually done in New York in the late '80s. Martha Rosler was involved with it. (The producing company was called Paper Tiger Television; it broadcast on free cable access once a week.[14]) That seems to be a different mode of diffusion, more appropriate to the medium, but I don't know if it's still possible. In any event, one of the biggest obstacles today is the commercial or ideological censorship of the media. Is that a concern for you and for other artists?

Wallinger: I think that this issue goes together with the disappearance of public meetings. I mean, that used to be where the rabble was roused and things got moving and people were inspired and you could feel part of a community of like-minded souls, and I think that that is getting more and more difficult, with the proliferation of TV channels, the way that art is being marginalized on the main terrestrial channels we have. When there were only three channels, before cable TV, even though there was not a lot about art, people would discuss what they had seen, there was still a forum for debate—that seems to be gone. So I don't know how one reclaims where

14. Based in New York, the video collective Paper Tiger Television began in 1981 with weekly public access shows that analyzed the impact of media on society; they continue to produce and distribute public access series as well as media literacy and video production workshops. See www.papertiger.org.

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that area is, I mean, it's partly in cyberspace. Can it still be on the street? Or can we bring the street into the museum? It's quite difficult to know where that space can be created because it's gone a bit elusive and I think it makes everyone feel a sense of hopelessness, really, in affecting what's nominally a democracy. I mean, we've got in this country three political parties that you can't put a cigarette paper between and they're kind of management firms . . . there isn't a manifesto, there isn't a plan, there isn't a way forward. So that is a good question, how can one generate some momentum behind different ideas?

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