

Mark Wallinger: *State Britain*, Tate Britain, London

15 January – 27 August 2007

Yesterday an extraordinary work of political-conceptual-appropriation-installation art went on view at Tate Britain. There'll be those who say it isn't art – and this time they may even have a point. It's a punch in the face, and a bunch of questions. I'm not sure if I, or the Tate, or the artist, know entirely what the work is up to. But a chronology will help.

June 2001: Brian Haw, a former merchant seaman and cabinet-maker, begins his pavement vigil in Parliament Square. Initially in opposition to sanctions on Iraq, the focus of his protest shifts to the “war on terror” and then the Iraq war. Its emphasis is on the killing of children. Over the next five years, his line of placards – with many additions from the public - becomes an installation 40 metres long.

April 2005: Parliament passes the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act. Section 132 removes the right to unauthorised demonstration within one kilometre of Parliament Square. This embraces Whitehall, Westminster Abbey, the Home Office, New Scotland Yard and the London Eye (though Trafalgar Square is exempted). As it happens, the perimeter of the exclusion zone passes cleanly through both Buckingham Palace and Tate Britain.

May 2006: The Metropolitan Police serve notice on Brian Haw to remove his display. The artist Mark Wallinger, best known for *Ecce Homo* (a statue of Jesus placed on the empty fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square), is invited by Tate Britain to propose an exhibition for its long central gallery. His first move is to make a complete photographic record of the Parliament Square protest. Days later, at 3am, the police impound almost all of Brian Haw's installation, and impose a three metre limit on his subsequent display.

July 2006: Working from the artist's photos, and in collaboration with Brian Haw, the Mike Smith Studio in South London (a firm of specialist fabricators, often employed by contemporary artists) begins to construct an exact replica of the protest installation.

January 2007: *State Britain* opens.

You can walk into Tate Britain off the street, and no one will stop you, no one will ask you for money, most of the time no one will even search your bag. You can walk straight in the main entrance and with a few steps, without any lifts or ramps or stairs, without turning a corner, you're in the middle of it. I can't think of another large gallery that is so directly open to the outdoors, so near to being a public space.

And you could say, in turn, that Brian Haw's installation was already a kind of artwork, a collective artwork, composed by him and his various supporters. It certainly fits the category of “contemporary folk art”, as established by Jeremy Deller's *Folk Archive*. It followed a recognised aesthetic of visual protest, right down to the dozens of small teddy bears (emblems of moral innocence) that adorned it.

It consisted of posters, banners, rainbow peace flags, newspaper cuttings, specially made paintings, crosses, poppies, horrific photos of burned, wounded and poisoned babies. As well as an artwork, you could also call it a demo, a shrine, a war-memorial, a work of documentation, an encampment, a blockade, one man's cry of pain and outrage. But put a perfect replica of it in Tate Britain, and it really looks nothing like art. What exactly is it doing in this place?

Mark Wallinger has raised that kind of question before, for example in *Ecce Homo*. What was Jesus doing as a statue on a plinth in London's central, civic square? What place did Jesus have, not in our hearts, but in our public realm and values? *State Britain* is another work whose art consists in an act of placing, the confrontation between a thing and a location. It sets the Parliament Square protest in Tate Britain. What does that do to this protest? And to Tate Britain?

In one way the display remains a protest, a piece of propaganda, an extension of Haw's action which itself continues in reduced form a kilometre along the Thames embankment. And as I support the cause myself (though baulking at teddies), I'm glad to see it furthered.

But then, set where it is, it's changed. It becomes a stretch of raw and vulnerably scrappy reality, estranged and stranded in this clean, towering classical chamber. The bamboo flagpoles, quite tall on the street, can't compete with the pillared heights of the Duveen Gallery. Bringing the show into this grand indoors makes it feel exposed.

At the same time it rages against a space whose impassive architecture seems designed not to hear its crudely frantic cries. The display fights back against the gallery - and also paradoxically lays claim to its authority. It's on show here after all, hosted in this institution, which is almost a branch of the British state.

At every point in *State Britain*, things are doubtful, disputable. The 40 metre line advances straight down the long central arcade. Its "front" is towards the historic rooms on the left, its back is to the modern rooms. In other words, it doesn't have a proper front view, as it did in Parliament Square. It can't directly address you as one big massed declaration. You can only walk along it, either side. It is less like a political statement, more like an exhibit for inspection.

The installation is remade to the last detail. The paintings have been painted again, the photos re-sourced, the teddy bears bought and soiled and distressed, along with Haw's sleeping bag, and every casual bit of detritus. This patiently exact remaking is a form of homage, a paying of honour. It is also a form of defiance, resurrecting and preserving the display in spite of its enforced dismantling. And it is like a historical record. It might even come from an imaginary heritage museum of Great British Protest.

Whose work is it? Many people's. Haw's display was a distinctly personal protest, not a generic anti-war campaign. It centred on his own resilient vigil. Several placards referred to him: "Beep for Brian". And significantly there was nothing from the Stop the War movement, an SWP front, whose logos and slogans ("Not In My Name") dominated the anti-war demos of 2003. But it wasn't entirely personal. There were the contributions from others, of miscellaneous tendency –

religious, anti-globalisation, anarchist, humanitarian – including works by the street-artist Banksy.

But *State Britain* is Mark Wallinger's work. He conceived this reconstruction/re-siting. It is also the work of the Mike Smith Studio, who recreated everything. Now it's on view it may become the work of the public too. Some visitors will surely try to make their own additions, just as they did with the original. As a work of public art, dealing with current issues, it is likely to be interpreted and discussed in ways it couldn't have imagined.

Some people will think it's not art – because it's naked propaganda, or because it wasn't properly created by its supposed artist. Some people, on the other hand, will think it's too arty: art safely getting its political kicks, while not engaging in serious political activity; art nicking somebody else's political action and turning it into a merely provocative spectacle. And some will simply treat it as an extra focus for protest, restoring it to its original function.

And it is safe, in one way. Placed inside Tate Britain, rather than (say) on the pavement outside it, *State Britain* is safe from being again dismantled by the police. Go through the door of the gallery and you're in privileged art-space, where speech can sometimes be extremely free - but is often suspected of being correspondingly impotent.

And *State Britain* has another component, which I haven't mentioned, a second focus, which could be a work by itself. The perimeter of the one kilometre exclusion zone is drawn across the floors of all Tate Britain's galleries. A line of black tape cuts through the whole building at a slightly curving diagonal, marking the pale of unauthorised free speech, the line that – literally, metaphorically - must not be crossed. By luck it passes almost exactly through the centre of the Tate's central octagon, halfway through the placard row.

Again, it's safely symbolic. The Act does not apply to the contents of Tate Britain. But, as nowhere else, the physical limit of this outrageous law is made visible, made public. The whole work is about making things public - making the art gallery an effective public space, making the experience of art into a public experience, making art's audience feel like a public, addressing a matter of common concern, rather than a random gathering of couples and singles. Oddly and sadly enough, an art gallery may be one few places left where you can find that feeling.