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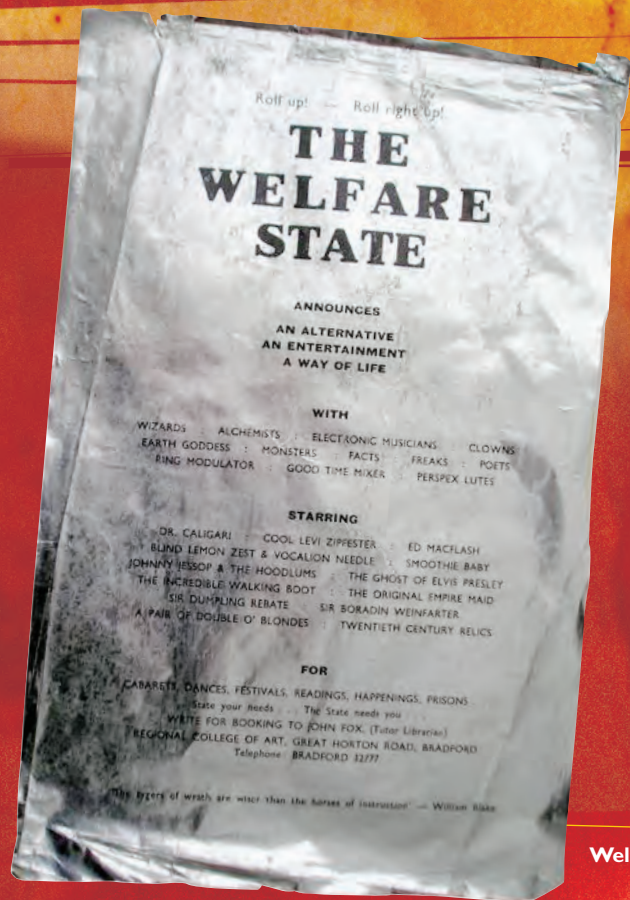
[www.midpenninearts.org.uk](http://www.midpenninearts.org.uk)

# acknowledgements

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**Gillian Whiteley**

Loughborough University,  
School of Art and Design



Welfare State poster, 1968.

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**In the turbulent year of 1968, WSI was born** in Bradford. Seeking "an alternative, an entertainment and a way of life" our tribe of creative souls plunged into the street believing we could drag art and theatre away from their enclaves. In 1971, invited by Mid Pennine Arts Association we



**...an introduction**

we transported our village of battered yellow caravans and canvas big top to Heasandford Quarry which was then a disused dump on the wrong side of the ring road and now the home of the vibrant Burnley Youth Theatre.

**We never looked back.** As we went along we planted more seeds and learned our trade on the road inventing or re-discovering prototypes of celebratory art such as anarchic carnival, samba bands, huge puppets, ice giants, site specific theatre and installations, lantern processions, fire sculptures and new ceremonies for rites of passage.

In 2008, funding tick boxes are dominated by issues of community access, ethnicity and cross-generational work but within this framework of surrogate social work such issues come before the art. In the Seventies and Eighties we demonstrated such concepts practically through our way of living and creating.

Even when we turned into jetset jesters stimulating international festivals with expansive and expensive spectacle we left behind a legacy of participation. Today our 1983 manual "Engineers of the Imagination" (Methuen) is still passed through gluey hands stoking the fires of a movement which continues to grow.

Now the Arts of Celebration have a place at the high table and when we settled to work in Barrow-in-Furness from 1983 to 1990 it slowly became part of the diet of some working people who, in a state of economic conscription, were and are obliged to build Trident submarines. Today in Barrow there is quite evidently more art around.

In 1990, nine miles away in market town Ulverston, a quarter of the shops were empty. Cultural and economic regeneration was triggered by a programme of festivals which we stimulated. Giant silk flags, innovative sculptural lanterns and home-grown comic street theatre (the world's biggest race of pantomime horses) are now happily commonplace and a much copied export.

## **WELFARE STATE INTERNATIONAL**

In 1998 after gaining a £1.6 million Arts Lottery award we turned a Victorian School in Ulverston into Lanternhouse, a fabulous oasis for the Celebratory Arts. For a decade it was a generator for epic artworks, choirs and bands where our artists working with local participants created exhibitions, parades, installation, books, films, performance and finally Longline, the Carnival Opera. Based on themes gathered from people living and working round Morecambe Bay these unique events, devised through scores of workshops, became part of the Ulverston calendar.

On April Fools day 2006 however, after much consultation, we archived WSI. Its job was accomplished [www.welfare-state.org](http://www.welfare-state.org). The edge has gone elsewhere. We need to re- think our institutions and shift perception while maintaining playfulness and wonder with generosity and austerity.

Fear can sap the imagination. It had even seeped into our own oasis. Consequently the visionary ensemble with which WSI artists proposed to take Lanternhouse forward was rejected by our Board. Those artists and the celebratory art movement flourish elsewhere and meanwhile Lanternhouse and its staff continue with a new direction. [www.lanternhouse.org](http://www.lanternhouse.org)

In WSI's farewell ceremony, artists were invited to cut a small piece of canvas from the last remaining yards of our old circus tent. These fragments were then exploded from a flying confetti bomb. A cornucopia of burning seeds to embody those germinated on that Heasandford rubbish tip rather long ago.

So we grow.

Thank you Mid Pennine Arts for initiating this exhibition and to Gillian Whiteley for her indefatigable curating.

**John Fox**

Dead Good Guides. The Beach House, Baycliff, Cumbria. LA12 9RY  
[www.deadgoodguides.com](http://www.deadgoodguides.com)  
April Fools Day 2008.

WELFARE STATE - AIMS - 12 OCT 72

TO UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF MAGIC.  
TO REPLACE THEATRE WITH CEREMONY.  
TO PLACATE THE GODS.  
TO REDISCOVER ARCHETYPES AND GIVE THEM TO THE PEOPLE.  
TO REPLACE BUREAUCRATIC TIME WITH PLANETARY RHYTHM.  
LIBATION OF THE EARTH.



# 1968

## WELFARE STATE

**Welfare State aims, 1972**

*Photo : Roger Perry.*



“...imagination, original art and spontaneous creative energy are being systematically destroyed by the current educational processes, materialism and bureaucratic decision-making of Western large-scale industrial society...”<sup>1</sup>

radical mayhem

# INTERNATIONAL and its followers TO 2006

As we mark the 40th anniversary of the political uprisings of 1968, it is fitting to revisit the roots, developments and legacies of Welfare State International (WSI), a collective of artists, musicians and performers which was founded the same year.<sup>2</sup> In the Sixties, the drama critic Lee Baxandall recognised the

revolutionary role of theatre and performance and its contribution to a collective consciousness. In 1968, he wrote about ‘the performative’ seeping into everydaylife, identifying it as ‘the dramaturgy of radical activity’.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the 1960s, collective spontaneous action and the intensity of the artistic encounter represented a popular form of political resistance. The expansion of imaginative consciousness was considered as a source of revolutionary potential –

<sup>1</sup> General policy statement 1977, in *The Tenth Anniversary of Welfare State*, booklet, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Initially, the group was known as Welfare State.

<sup>3</sup> See Lee Baxandall, ‘Spectacles and Scenarios: A Dramaturgy of Radical Activity’ in L. Baxandall, (ed) *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, Penguin, 1972.



demonstrated perfectly by one of the slogans scrawled on the streets of Paris in 1968,

“We are inventing a new and original world. Imagination has seized power.”<sup>4</sup>

Various described as ‘dream-weavers, purveyors of images, sculptors of visual poetry, civic magicians and engineers of the imagination’<sup>5</sup>, WSI’s presentation of ‘an aesthetics of the alternative’ was an amalgam of myth-making, feasting and audacious performance. But it is evident from their early statements and activities that their ethos was rooted in the radical political ideas of 1968. Herbert Marcuse’s writings on cultural impoverishment and new ways of being and the ideas of the Situationists were particularly influential on WSI’s founder, John Fox. Arguing for a rediscovery of the role of ‘play’ in social life and the urban environment, the Situationists suggested that all space should be treated as performance space and all people as performers. As Guy Debord wrote,

“...the constructed situation would be ephemeral, without a future, passageways – a syntheses of sublime moments when a combination of environment and people produces a transcendent and revolutionary consciousness.”<sup>6</sup>

Radical rather than didactic, WSI’s early ‘manifesto’ statements focused on providing alternative ‘state’ support for the imagination,

“Why are you called Welfare State and are you political?”

“We started with the name seven years ago and it is now well known. In fact, we offer assistance to the national imagination rather than agitprop. People have a need for ceremony in their lives. Our vision is to make theatrical celebration a reality and available to all.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Slogan on the main entrance of the Sorbonne, May 1968, reported in *The Times*, London, 17 May 1968. Also see exhibition, *May 1968: Street posters from the Paris Rebellion*, Hayward Project Space, Southbank Centre, 1st May – 1st June 2008 <http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk>

<sup>5</sup> *The Tenth Anniversary of Welfare State* booklet 1978. *Engineers of the Imagination* is the title of The Welfare State Handbook, first published 1983, revised 1990 and reprinted many times since.

<sup>6</sup> Guy de Bord, quoted in *The Situationist City*, MIT press, p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> *The Tenth Anniversary of Welfare State* booklet 1978.





WSI was much more than just an artists' collective as it also represented an attempt to envision and enact new ways of living and relating. In the early days, with its commitment to self-sufficiency, it was as much a social as an artistic experiment. WSI's collective ethos was part of what Baz Kershaw has alluded to as 'a rare attempt to evolve an oppositional popular culture'.<sup>8</sup> For almost forty years, WSI were agents of 'carnavalesque resistance'.<sup>9</sup> As cultural catalysts, their activities highlighted the potential for art to emancipate individual human creativity and contribute to socio-political change.

As Tony Coult commented in 1976,

“...in many ways, Welfare State are the most daring of the Alternative Theatre companies because they are in the business of yoking together the aesthetic and visceral nature of theatre with a developing political analysis and at the same time of making that powerful conjunction available to people who have no interest in theatres or plays.”<sup>10</sup>

As a constantly changing collective of individual artists, musicians and engineers, WSI collaborated in a diverse set of practices, devising and creating performances, events, installations and earthworks. Their work ranged from outrageous pyrotechnic spectacles such as *Parliament in Flames* to running workshops and making small-scale interventions engaging with ordinary people on housing estates, in workplaces, schools and prisons. Whether they were operating from their nomadic village in Burnley or, later, from their permanent base at Lanternhouse in Cumbria, WSI aimed to break down barriers between artforms and integrate art with ordinary life and they were prepared to work in any sympathetic space to achieve that.

<sup>8</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance – Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, London/New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> See discussion of alternative/community theatre as radical cultural intervention in Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance – Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, London/New York: Routledge, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Tony Coult, *Plays and Players*, May 1976, pp. 20-23.



top left : **Parliament in Flames**, Burnley, 1976  
 Directed by Boris Howarth, designer Maggie Howarth, Ali Wood, Andy Plant, Tim Hunkin, Tony Lewery with pyrotechnics by David Clough.  
 Photo: Daniel Meadows.

top right : **Early Welfare State event**, Arts Centre York  
 bottom right : **Welfare State**, Leeds, photo: Yorkshire Post.

**ARTS CENTRE YORK**  
 Friday 24 october

**THE WELFARE STATE  
 AMAZING MUSICAL  
 VARIETY SHOW!**

with  
 alchemists, clowns,  
 freaks and  
 earth goddess!

two different shows  
 at 8.0 and 11.0 pm



**THE WELFARE STATE**

# Beginnings and the aesthetics of the alternative

## Beginnings and the aesthetics of the alternative

“The Welfare State is in many ways the most mind-blowing group of all. It contains many elements...art school, rock culture, music, pagan ritual...all fused into a poetic, Dionysian vision of man liberated by revolution.”<sup>11</sup>

The setting up of the Welfare State collective in 1968 owed a lot to the creative vision of its founder and artistic director, John Fox, then a lecturer and librarian at Bradford College of Art. For the artist-poet Adrian Henri, the most exciting mixed-media work of the 1960s was going on in Yorkshire with ‘the country’s most progressive theatre workshop’ based in Bradford.<sup>12</sup> This was primarily due to the radical work of Albert Hunt who famously orchestrated the re-enactment of the October Revolution with hundreds of students in 1967. Fox collaborated on one-off events with Hunt, later working with Boris Howarth and

various others including Sue Gill and Roger Coleman, and drawing on a pool of art students, artists and musicians in various combinations. Radical activism provided a backdrop but the creative techniques and aesthetic vision of WSI were rooted in the work of international groups such as el Teatro Campesino, San Francisco Mime Troupe and the US-based Bread and Puppet Theatre.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside these political roots, WSI’s own ‘aesthetics of the alternative’ brought together a concern with Jungian archetypal myth-making, New Age ‘magic’ and a Blakeian vision typically reflected in Sixties’ Pop and counterculture. The first WSI event was *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a day-long celebration of William Blake’s poetry staged on 6 December 1968 at the Ashton Memorial in Lancaster;

<sup>11</sup> J. Hammond, *Theatre Quarterly*, October 1973.

<sup>12</sup> See Adrian Henri, *Environments and Happenings*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1974, pp. 118-119.

<sup>13</sup> On the San Francisco Mime Troupe see James Brook, Chris Carlsson and Nancy J. Peters, (eds), *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, San Francisco: City Lights, 1998. Founded in 1962-3, Bread and Puppet Theatre was primarily active in the anti-Vietnam war protest movement around New York and moved to Vermont in 1970 where it is still based. See <http://www.breadandpuppet.org>

“...a strange pot-pourri of stilt-walkers, fire-eaters, speciality performing bear, Punch and Judy, trade union banners and radical student dissent....As evening came, the whole patchwork of artists and audience heaved its way from the park to the town centre. Chanting liberation slogans at institutions such as a boarding-school, a prison and a stranded police car on the way down, there was no doubt that Art had broken out of the frame.”<sup>14</sup>

After taking part in the Selby Festival in 1969, WSI started to develop more street theatre.<sup>15</sup> In those early days though, WSI drew not only on the vernacular traditions of mummers and pantomime but they were also inspired by a range of fine art provocateurs of the 1950s and 60s - such as Yve Klein, Joseph Beuys, Claes Oldenberg, John Cage and Fluxus.<sup>16</sup> Echoing the ‘happening’, WSI created events or assembled environments in specific locations, expanding on a basis of rehearsed material through improvisational techniques. In

1970, WSI performed *Original Peter*, the first ‘live’ happening on TV, involving a tattooist, acrobat, live insects, jazz and film. Early performances employed diverse techniques and an array of artforms and included *Dr Strangebrew’s Diorama* (1970) - a surreal maze on a Devon beach; *Heptonstall* (1970) - a gothic horror show staged in a marquee at Hebden Bridge; *Circus Time* (1970) - one-day carnival in Bradford and *Sweet Misery of Life* (1971) staged in a custom-built PVC structure. Performances, carnivals and processions included fire-eaters, knife-throwers, wrestlers, razor-blade eaters and pyrotechnics.

WSI events were characteristically collaborative. In *Cosmic Circus*, John Fox joined the jazz composer Mike Westbrook to create a series of one-off events, street theatre and multi-media performances that were toured around the country.<sup>17</sup> Other projects with Mike Westbrook included *Earthrise* - this finale event, billed as ‘Space-Age Entertainment’ at

<sup>14</sup> John Fox, *Eyes on Stalks*, London: Methuen, 2002, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> John Fox, ‘Theatre to Liberate Fantasies – Welfare State and The Cosmic Circus’, *Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 8, October–December 1972, pp. 4-5 (special issue on ‘Theatre for Social Change’).

<sup>16</sup> John Fox, *Eyes on Stalks*, London: Methuen, 2002, p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> The final *Cosmic Circus* production was staged at the Tower of London in 1972 with ravens, high-diver, tightrope-walkers and a carnival procession with Jeff Nuttall as ‘the syphilitic king’.





top row l-r :

**Hollow Ring**, shadow puppets by John Fox with Pete Moser, 1993

**Welfare State Street Event**, 1970, photo: David Dyas

bottom row l-r :

**Roger Coleman in a Bradford Alley**, 1970's, photo: John Fox.

**Welfare State Poster**, 1970's, photo: Roger Perry.

**Welfare State in Taunton**, 1972, photo: Roger Perry.

**Processions**, Burnley, 1970's



right : **Erecting Tents**, South West  
tour, 1972, photo: Roger Perry.

far right : **South West Tour**, 1972.

below : **The Loves, Lives and  
Murders of Lancelot Barrabas  
Quail**, 1977, photo: Daniel Meadows.





Swansea's 1971 Arts Festival, employed rock music, light, film, images, gymnastics and puppetry<sup>18</sup> - and *Winter Rising* (1972), an epic three-day production at Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry. Importantly, 1972 marked the appearance of Jamie Proud's alter-ego, Lancelot Quail, at Surrey Hall in Brixton. Later billed as 'Britain's new folk hero (a working-class hermaphrodite strong-man)',<sup>19</sup> 'Lancelot Icarus Handyman Barrabas Quail' became a constantly recurring reference point for the company. In September 1972, WSI spent a month conducting the *Travels of Lancelot Quail*, a kind of processional theatrical event which roved from Glastonbury through Somerset, Devon and Cornwall, culminating afloat on a submarine off Land's End.

## Burnley residency

“On a plateau above a polluted river skirting greenhouses, allotments, new factories and NCB sludge, the Welfare State settlement – a cross between a Bolivian tin-mine, TS Eliot's 'wasteland'

and an Inca stilt village – is growing and extended through scarecrows, subterranean tunnels and living vans decorated with mythical paintings of Beauty and the Beast.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1973, WSI planned an exhibition and event at the Serpentine Gallery in London but it failed to materialise when the Department of the Environment refused to allow them to pitch a circus tent in the gardens.

Following this, the company set up temporary camp in caravans and lorries on a reclaimed rubbish tip at Heasandford quarry in Burnley on the invitation of Mid Pennine Arts as part of an arts programme in the community, innovative even in a generally adventurous period. This was a bold move too for WSI as it represented part of a political assault on established theatre and the bias of London critics. For the next five years, with Boris Howarth and Lol Coxhill playing key artistic roles,<sup>21</sup> Welfare State built a self-contained and sustaining community of growing

<sup>18</sup> *Adaptor 1971* – Swansea Arts Festival programme, University College of Swansea Arts Festival. *Earthrise* was originally commissioned by Sir Bernard Miles and presented at Mermaid Theatre November 1969.

<sup>19</sup> Welfare State, *Beauty and the Beast*, exhibition leaflet, Burnley, May 1973.

<sup>20</sup> Welfare State, *Beauty and the beast*, exhibition leaflet, Burnley, May 1973.

families and associated artists, musicians and performers. Catherine Kiddle recounts the difficulties of a nomadic lifestyle,

“So I came home from hospital with my baby into a caravan parked in a disused quarry, with cold water standpipes, minimal plumbing and electricity available only in the evenings when the generators was turned on. Between us my husband and I were earning just one third of what we had been bringing home before. Most of my friends thought I was crazy, and when I stood outside on bitterly cold mornings, hunched over a standpipe, my hands in freezing water; rinsing nappies, I agreed with them.”<sup>22</sup>

With an expanding population of children and with a programmatic commitment to contemporary ideas on progressive education, the blossoming Free School movement and the development of adventure playgrounds, individual WSI members registered as 'home teachers' and the company opened its own school in April 1975. With the continual planning and preparation for journeys,

technical feats, musical rehearsals, script discussions, vehicle maintenance, costing and budgeting, scavenging for materials and props, researching performances and ongoing development of the site – the company and its activities were a primary educational resource. Providing a well-structured but child-centred educational experience which developed creativity and imagination was central.

“So what should we teach these children for whom we now had total responsibility? Knowledge, facts, experience yawned before us, the great blackness of space, infinite and impossible to comprehend. Our own knowledge, our skills, our own moments of excitement and illumination in learning shone out like stars....We wanted to give them the stars.”<sup>23</sup>

In one of the first projects at the new Burnley base, *Beauty and The Beast*, the company spent three months improvising with junk to create a makeshift labyrinthine environment for a performed narrative featuring the mythic figure, Lancelot Quail. In the final event, the audience was invited to roam through this organic structure

<sup>21</sup> Boris Howarth was Associate Artistic Director and Lol Coxhill, improvising jazz musician and composer, was WSI's Musical Director.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Kiddle, *What shall we do with the children?*, Devon: Spindlewood, 1981, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Catherine Kiddle, *What shall we do with the children?*, Devon: Spindlewood, 1981, p. 32.



far left : **Welfare State Site,**  
Heasandford Quarry, 1973,  
photo: Roger Perry.

left : **Daniel Fox riding through**  
**Burnley,** 1973, photo: Roger Perry.

below : **Telegram,** John Fox responding  
to decision not to allow circus tent at  
Serpentine Gallery, London, 1973

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POST OFFICE  
INLAND TELEGRAM  
FOR POSTAGE STAMPS

TO - OVERNIGHT - SUE GRAYSON SERPENTINE GALLERY KENSINGTON  
GARDENS HYDE PARK LONDON

Further immediate decision stating no circus tent welfare state cannot  
perform repeat cannot perform stop artistic unit now impossible  
without tent stop sorry stop - JOHN FOX

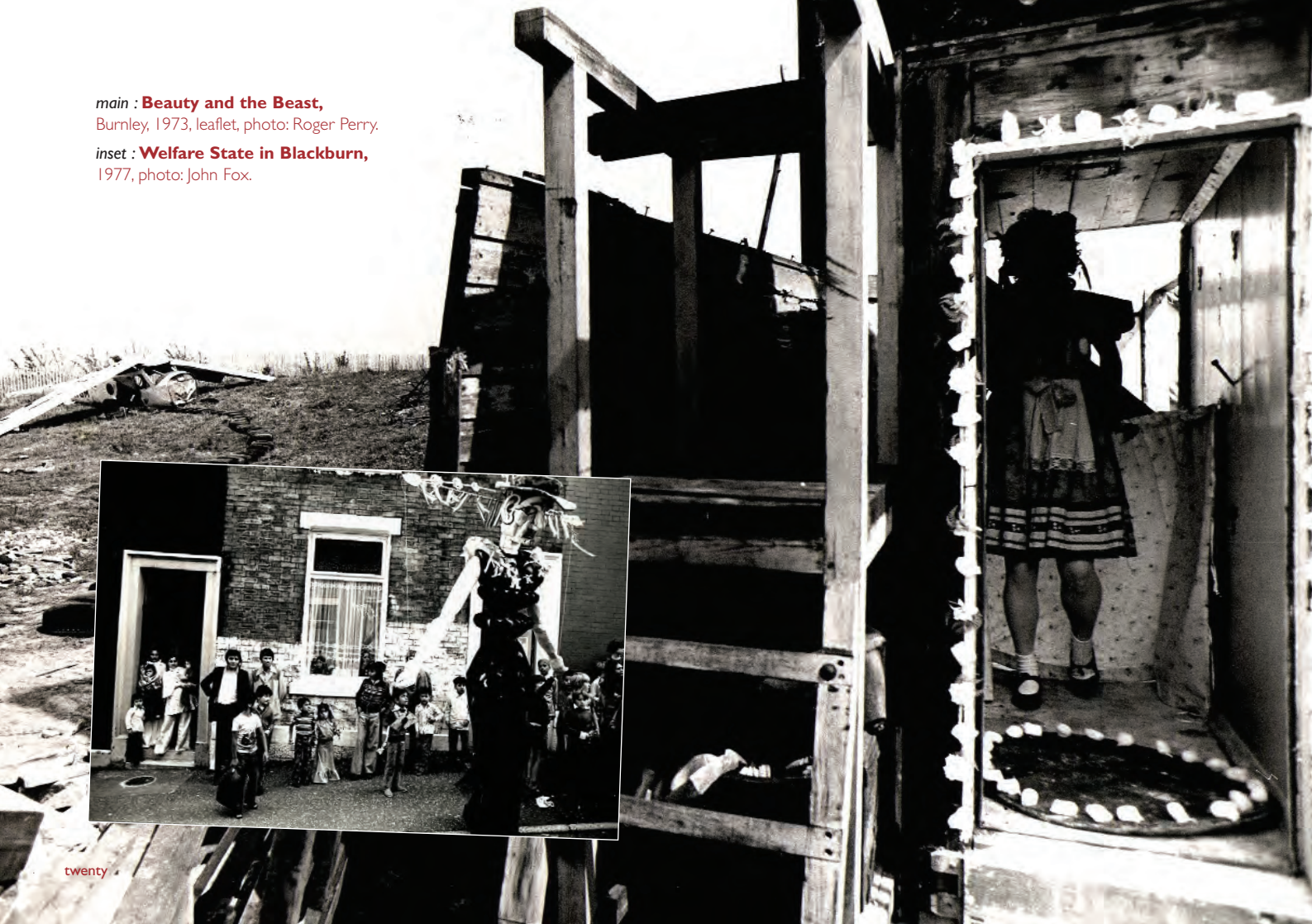
Head Postmaster

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main : **Beauty and the Beast**,  
Burnley, 1973, leaflet, photo: Roger Perry.

inset : **Welfare State in Blackburn**,  
1977, photo: John Fox.



while WSI acted out a 'metaphysical theatrical performance' through a constant stream of visual evocations and references.

In November 1973, WSI created the first large-scale bonfire event which was later staged as *Parliament in Flames* in Burnley (directed by Boris Howarth, 1976) with an audience of 10,000 people. This event was then re-created in various places including Milton Keynes (1978), Ackworth (1979), Tamworth (1980) and, finally, Catford (1981) with 15,000 spectators.

Whilst at Burnley, in 1974 WSI made their first permanent earthwork at Gawthorpe Hall and their ice giant at Wath-upon-Deane. The following year, they created Harbinger, a large-scale sculpture from scrapyard junk and rusty cars, for the International Performance Festival in Birmingham city centre. Besides outdoor site-specific projects, they also worked in galleries - for example, with Bob Frith of Horse and Bamboo Theatre, they constructed a fully operative Ghost Train at the Mid Pennine gallery in Burnley in January 1977.

The Burnley period culminated in Barrabas, a six-week project, described as a 'total theatrical environment' in which daily performances included film, sideshows, processions and the 'ritual, disembowelling of The Dead Man (and his culture)'.<sup>24</sup>

By 1978, a series of aesthetic and directional differences developed within the group and a number of individuals split off to form IOU. Subsequently, the nomadic school folded and the Burnley base was dismantled. The Fox family went on a residency to Australia and the WSI office shifted to Liverpool. In that period, Tim Fleming was artistic director and Boris Howarth worked with Adrian Mitchell to produce Uppendown Mooney. On return, the Fox family moved to Ulverston and this marked a new phase of work for WSI. One aspect was a renewed involvement in international events such as Tempest on Snake Island for the Toronto Theatre Festival in 1981 and The Wasteland and the Wagtail, performed on a mountain side at the first Japanese International Theatre Festival in Togamura in 1982.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Tony Coult and Baz Kershaw (eds), *Engineers of the Imagination, The Welfare State Handbook*, [1983], London: Methuen, 1990, p. 245.

<sup>25</sup> WSI's first overseas project was a continuous performance piece *Fanfare for Europe* in 1973 with John Bull Puncture Repair Kit, Jeff Nuttall, Roland Miller, Genesis P.Orridge et al. One of WSI's later important international performances was *False Creek: A Visual Symphony*, a six-week residency in partnership with Canadian artists and musicians at World Expo 86 in Vancouver.

More significantly though, the shift to Cumbria represented a desire to establish a permanent base and community roots in which to develop new forms of socially-engaged participative practice.

right : **Uppendown Mooney**, director Boris Howarth, script by Adrian Mitchell, 1978, cover design: Bob Frith.

below l-r :

**Harbinger**, Birmingham International Festival Performance, 1975, poster:

**Ice Giant**, Wath-upon-Deerne, 1974, photo: John Fox.

**The Loves, Lives and Murders of Lancelot Barabbas Quail**, print by Bob Frith.

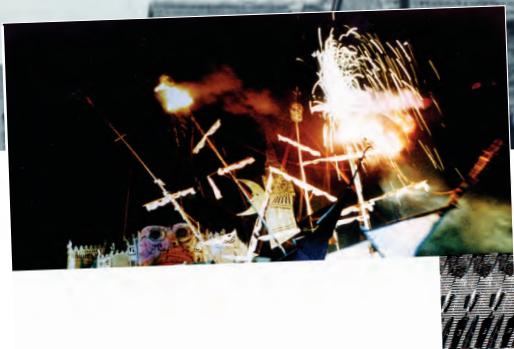
**Welfare State and families outside the old school**, Ulverston, 1988, photo: Daniel Meadows.

opposite : **Centre Pages of The Tenth Anniversary of Welfare State booklet**, Street Procession, 1978.

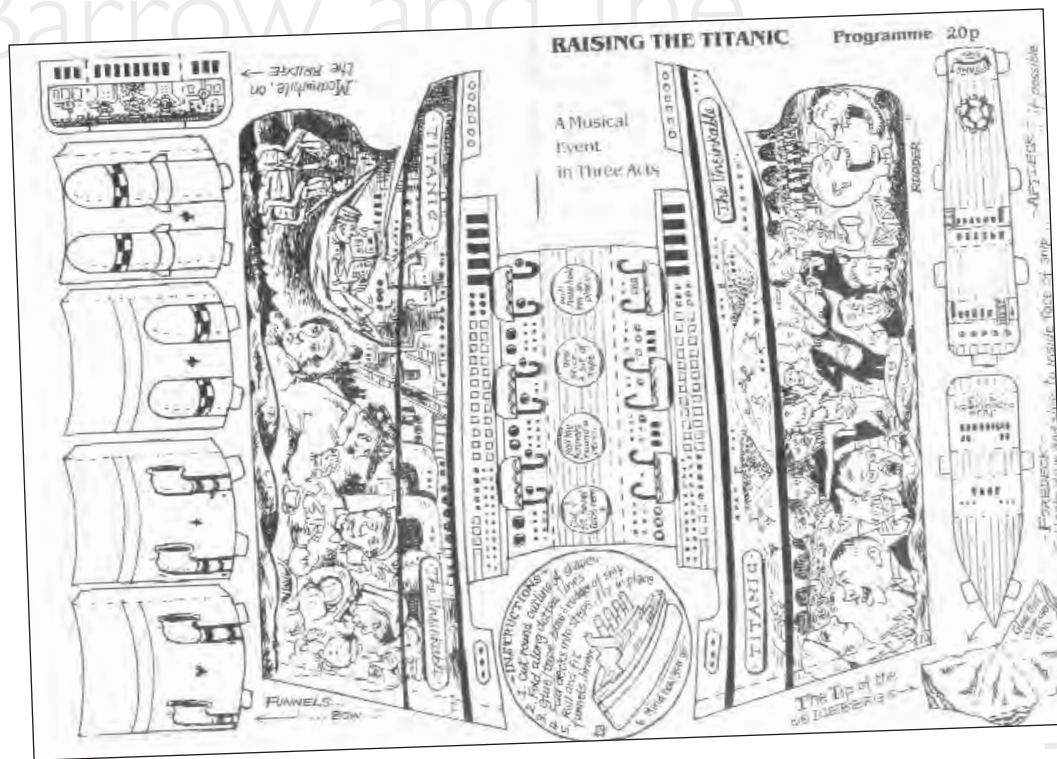
opposite inset : **Parliament in Flames**, Catford, 1981, director Boris Howarth, pyrotechnics David Clough.











**Raising the Titanic**, Canal Dock Basin, Limehouse, 1983,  
commissioned for London International Festival of Theatre programme

## Barrow and the industrial wastelands of the 80's

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In 1983, WSI started to work in Barrow-in-Furness, a town described, patronisingly, by the Guardian's arts critic as 'a cultural desert'.<sup>26</sup> With long traditions of working class organisation and culture, the community was reliant on the shipbuilding industry and the manufacture of nuclear submarines. Between January and April 1983, WSI collaborated with Sheffield City Polytechnic on a full-length 'community feature film', *King Real and the Hoodlums*, based on a script (derived from Shakespeare's *King Lear*) by Adrian Mitchell with music by Peter Moser, mainly filmed on location at Barrow with mostly unemployed local youth as a rabble of local Hoodlums. Kershaw notes that the film had a blatantly anti-nuclear story – something bound to have an overtly subversive impact in Barrow, a town whose economic survival depended on making weapons of mass destruction.<sup>27</sup> Local reception was mixed as *King Real* played with the contradictions of the town's industrial and economic situation.

Four years later, on the invitation of Barrow Borough Council, WSI spent six-months creating a 'sculptural enhancement' of the Town Hall, described by one critic as 'probably the biggest artwork in Europe'.<sup>28</sup> On a grand scale, with a market, an oratorio composed and collaged from traditional songs by Peter Moser with a huge choir, exploding birthday cake, pyrotechnic displays and acrobatic performances on the building itself,

“Town Hall Tattoo was extraordinary for its integration of acceptable civic celebration, extravagantly anarchic imagery and a subtle radicalism which poked gentle and good humoured fun at the very values the event appeared to valorise. This was ironic agit-prop on the grand scale, heavily disguised as a straightforward carnivalesque party.”<sup>29</sup>

After the 'civic' success of this event, Barrow council went on to fund WSI to work with the

<sup>26</sup> Robin Thorner, 'Cultural Desert Blooms', *The Guardian*, 11 July 1987.

<sup>27</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance – Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, p. 215.

<sup>28</sup> Robin Thorner, 'Town Hall Tattoo', *The Guardian*, 13 July 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance – Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, p. 220.

town's community for a further three-year project, culminating in the Feast of Furness in July 1990 - a 'total festival' which included story-telling, poetry readings, cabarets, street events and 'Rock the Boat', an anarchic nightclub in July 1990. The Golden Submarine provided the typically spectacular finale. The centrepiece of the Festival was Shipyard Tales, a cycle of plays, devised by local young people and adults, which explored the complex moral issues and paradoxes of a community whose economic survival was bound up with warfare.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See John Fox, *Eyes on Stalks*, p. 119.



**King Real and the Hoodlums,**

1983, community feature film,  
Barrow-in-Furness,  
script by Adrian Mitchell,  
WSI brochure cover



**WELFARE STATE INTERNATIONAL  
PRESENTS**



**A SIX MONTH PROGRAMME OF EVENTS  
TO CELEBRATE 100 YEARS OF BARROW TOWN HALL**

**LEADING UP TO  
TOWN HALL TATTOO IN JULY 1987**

**Commissioned by Barrow Borough Council  
for Barrow Town Hall Centenary Celebrations**



left : **Barrow Town Hall Tattoo**, 1987, programme  
above left : **WSI Winter School Programme**, 1986  
above right : **WSI Summer School Programme**, 1981

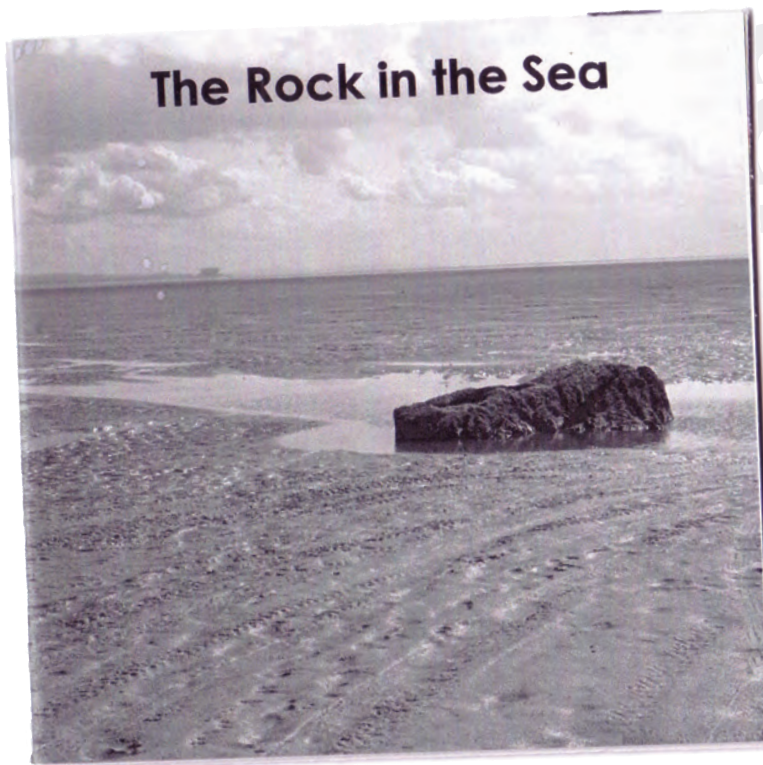




left : **False Creek: A Visual Symphony**, Expo 86, Vancouver; programme.  
A six week residency in partnership with Canadian artists and musicians.

bottom left : **Longline**, the final performance, 2006

below : **The Rock in the Sea**, song cycle performed at Lanternhouse



## From lanterns to Longline, the Carnival Opera

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WSI worked with fire and light for many years but the prime aesthetic inspiration for the lantern festivals they went on to create in Europe, Canada and Australia, was the Lantern Sea Ceremony they saw in Northern Japan in 1982.

“High above us in a temple on the edge of a forested volcano, immense drums were being beaten. What looked like thirty tall stained-glass windows, each maybe four or five metres tall, processed slowly down a vertical track and swayed perilously through the trees...each float was carried by a turbulent wave of thirty muscular sweating men in loincloths, accompanied by the drummers...The lanterns themselves were made of shallow cloth or paper boxes, with candle-light, framed in carved mahogany and emblazoned with lurid painted demonic caricatures of gods and warriors...”<sup>31</sup>

Bringing this idea back into their local base, they devised the first Ulverston Lantern Festival in 1983. This became an annual event which continues to be an integral part of a consistent programme of work in the community. With the building of its headquarters,

Lanternhouse, in 1999, WSI has, arguably, played a key role in the cultural regeneration of the Lake District peninsulas region.

The final valedictory WSI show Longline (2006) was a multimedia performance which synthesised both new and recurrent themes, narratives and images from forty years work. Longline was the third in a trilogy of works - the first was One Rock, the second was Barebones - which investigated the communities and natural environments around Morecambe Bay. These strands were interwoven with reflections on current ecological issues, the influx of migrant workers, the environmental consequences of nuclear power, the impact of local tourism, the role played by nearby arms and pharmaceutical industries and the effects of global warming. It included many familiar WSI elements: community choirs, dancers, acrobats, puppetry, live music and a finale with fireworks and lanterns. Performed in a circus tent, with over 500 people participating in the three productions, with professional performers working alongside young people, it invited reflection on WSI's origins as a radical, itinerant company.

<sup>31</sup> See John Fox, *Eyes on Stalks*, pp. 75-76.



*below l-r :*

**Lantern Festival Images,**

photo: Ged Murray.

**Eye on Stalk,** Lantern Festival, Ulverston.

**Ulverston Lantern Festival,**

1996, photo: Ged Murray.

*opposite page:*

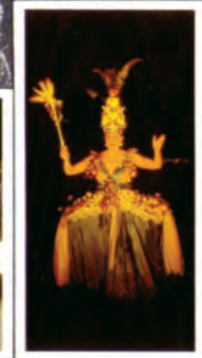
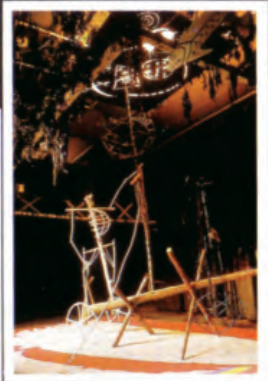
**Lantern procession,** Ulverston











## Legacies and followers

With almost forty years of creating 'radical mayhem', WSI invented hybrid artforms, pioneered 'site-specific' multi-media performance and played a key role in developing alternative models of participative art. Furthermore, it is interesting that many aspects of WSI's work on the development of alternative sustainable and ecological practices have become absorbed into mainstream culture. They created prototypes for alternative rituals and rites of passage such as weddings and funerals - their first naming ceremony was in 1969, and they were investigating 'green' funerals and working on an alternative technology project on a residency at Machynlleth in 1978.<sup>32</sup> In a contemporary 'eco-conscious' world in which we are forced to re-think our belief in materialism and acquisition, WSI's 'aesthetics of the alternative' remain relevant.

By exposing audiences to sensations that go beyond everyday perceptions and opinions, art is able to open up new ways of thinking about and engaging with the world. WSI were pioneers of provisionality, providing transitory performative experiences which

have remained in cultural memory and popular imagination. They acted as catalysts, creating environments in which anything seemed possible and making events which assaulted the senses. As Brian Massumi has noted, 'an affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity: it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential' and - as Deleuze and Guattari have contended - this aspect of art is potentially revolutionary.<sup>33</sup>

For WSI, collaboration was particularly important as it enabled hundreds of individual artists, musicians and performers to come together. Recently, there has been a revival of interest in the development of new forms of collaborative artistic practices, spurred on by the 'new collectivism' of online communities, flashb mobs and blogospheres. As Stimson and Sholette point out,

“The newness of the new collectivism...is only a rebirth of intensity, the welling up of spirits from the past, a recall to the opportunities and battle lines of old.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *The Tenth Anniversary of Welfare State* booklet, 1978.

<sup>33</sup> Brian Massumi, 'Translator's Forward: Pleasures of Philosophy' in Giles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987.

<sup>34</sup> Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (eds), *Collectivism after Modernism, The Art of Social Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 3.

Grant Kester has written of the disparate network of contemporary artists and artists' collectives working at the intersection of art and cultural activism - in public spaces, markets and car parks with diverse communities and audiences. Noting that artists hold a compromised position in society and that a healthy scepticism is needed about claims that aesthetic experience can transform consciousness, Kester reminds us that there are still artists committed to the idea that culture has emancipatory potential. They seek to activate this potential through processes of dialogue and collaborative production.<sup>35</sup>

'Radical mayhem' encapsulates something of WSI's 'joyous blend of visual spectacle, popular theatre and celebration'<sup>36</sup> but they were primarily concerned with liberating creative potential and much can be learnt by exploring their journey and that of their followers. WSI's 'followers' were not only numerous individuals who participated in processions, performances, feasts and celebrations

but they were also those artists, performers and musicians who collaborated with WSI and went on to form other groups. WSI has a rich heritage of numerous and often inter-connected groups. Looking back, Bob Frith of Horse and Bamboo Theatre, has described his time with WSI as an 'intense learning ground'. Art Hewitt worked with John Fox and later went on to be a founder director of Strange Cargo, a company which acknowledges 'there is still a great deal of WSI ethos' in what they do. Hannah and Daniel Fox worked on various projects with the Netherlands-based experimental performance group Dogtroep, with a long history of WSI association. Paula Jardine, regards WSI as a 'huge influence' on the work of the Vancouver-based company Public Dreams which she founded in 1985.<sup>37</sup>

The legacy of WSI is extensive and has generated a set of complex artistic relationships. Moreover, participative and collaborative forms of practice have a particular currency. Consequently, an

<sup>35</sup> Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, p. 153.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Coult in Coult and Kershaw (eds), *Engineers of the Imagination, The Welfare State Handbook*, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Author's correspondence with Bob Frith, Strange Cargo, Pauline Jardine, Public Dreams and various members of Dogtroep, February–April 2008.



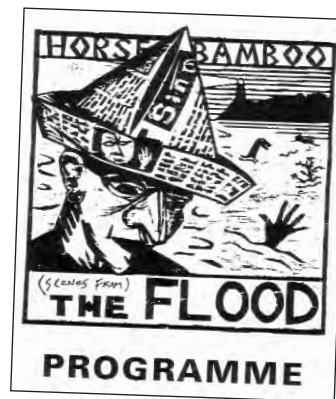


**Dogtroep**, based in the Netherlands

increasing focus on the work of WSI is especially timely. WSI's family and artistic histories are unwieldy, diverse and have generated an expanded network of performance groups, artist collectives and street-theatre ensembles within a national and international context, much of which, excitingly, is yet to be explored and documented.<sup>38</sup>

## Gillian Whiteley

Curator



**Horse and Bamboo Theatre**,  
programme

<sup>38</sup> The Mid Pennine Arts exhibition, *Radical Mayhem: Welfare State International and its Followers*, is part of a major research project currently being planned by the author in conjunction with the Theatre Collection, University of Bristol.

# headlandford quarry

Shaped like a frying pan, you would enter the site along its handle, past the sign at the gate, through a guard of honour of caravans, one cold tap to every couple of plots.

At the far end it opened out into the work area. A pantechinon, a land rover, a converted coach, a hearse, assorted vans, an ex US army trailer and a giant Scammel truck all parked up for towing and needing never-ending maintenance.


To the left a 100ft long new wooden shed with double doors for large puppets. Office, library, meeting space, making space, rehearsal and props store. Inside and outside in most weathers, company members would be preparing and building the next show. Every one a one-off.

Random structures – a redundant aerodrome control tower in bold red and white checks, a poly tunnel and the all important hut for the chemical toilets. The council's "sludge gulper" would arrive on site uncannily coinciding with TV filming or a VIP visit. They always managed to leave a give-away puddle outside.

A former rubbish tip, it had been landscaped into a steep sided amphitheatre and grassed over for the Council's depot of winter gritting salt, so most of the ground was unsuitable for gardening, although over our 7 year residency we did find some fertile patches.

Around 15 –18 adults lived on site all the time. It was our home, except when we were on tour. Between us we had 9 children under 9 – one at every stage of development from a babe in arms up to a 7 year old. School took place in the mornings on site – 3 lessons taught by 3 different people in 3 different caravans, whilst a 4th person ran the crèche. Before long the children introduced the ringing of a handbell as the signal to move on. Afternoons were less structured. Time to discover what was happening that day on the site. They could connect with music or costume-making or trench-digging or wheel-changing or make their own dens. A surplus cello case [minus cello] in the sand pit sailed off on many a voyage.





Some afternoon we bundled the kids into the back of the landrover, pre-seat belts, and headed off to the Slipper Baths [built for the surrounding terrace houses before the days of bathrooms] where deep Victorian tubs with voluminous hot water awaited. If they saw our tribe coming, it was not unusual to drop the window of the ticket office and close early. "See. I told you they were a dirty lot..."

Around 4.30 the generator would go on for 4 or 5 hours, for electric light or tools. During the time of the miners' strike, fuel was scarce. Someone had to go out into the cold night and switch it off before bedtime.

The boundaries between our public and private lives needed care. Although caravans allowed us both to create an instant living/working production base and also to take it on the road, they also meant we could return to our own space and have some vestige of domestic, maybe family life, inside. Time off was our own. This was hard for some single people who could feel isolated, but it cushioned our nerves when living so close to each other. We seldom ate together as a company, unless we were on tour and our host was providing meals.

The rumour of the site spread far and wide. Usually unannounced, USA theatre professors, geodesic dome builders, drop-outs arrived. Some brought wonderful new skills, others needed us more than we needed them and occasionally we asked them to move on. We maintained guest accommodation, often unbelievably spartan. Werner van Wely, whose saxophone audition awoke us early one autumn morning, was so desperate to stay he lived in the back of an uninsulated transit van for 3 months. He survived and went off to form the legendary DogTroep in Amsterdam.

The frying pan plan of the site became a metaphor for the company's work. A stir fry of tantalizing flavours spread far and wide. Now many people the world over celebrate with recipes we were lucky to discover.

**Sue Gill**



# the welfare state manifesto 1972

The **WELFARE STATE** makes images, invent rituals, devise ceremonies, objectify the unpredictable, establish and enhance atmospheres for particular places, times, situations and people.

In current terminology we fuse fine art, theatre and life style but we aim to make such categories and role definition in itself obsolete.

We make art using the traditions of popular theatre such as mummers, circus, fairground, puppets, music hall, so that as well as being entertaining and funny and apparently familiar in style to a popular audience our work has a more profound implication.

We use modern equivalents of Bosch, Breughel, and Grunwald in the context of 20th century entertainment and existentialism.

We are artists concerned with the survival and character of the imagination and the individual within a technologically advanced society.

We create openly, freely and publicly and never work to make repetitive products. Most of our shows are once off occasions.

We are nomadic and aim to travel more freely, widely and rapidly with a large complex of vehicles, equipment, big top and people to demonstrate the possibilities of a marvellous and rich surreal circus.

We will continue to analyse the relationship between performance and living, acting and identity, theatre and reality, entertainment and product, archetype and need.

We will react to new stimulus and situations spontaneously and dramatically and continue to fake unbelievable art as a necessary way of offering cultural and organic death.



**John Fox**, 1973, photo: Daniel Meadows

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