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Retrieving 1970s radicalism: Welfare State International and multimedia mayhem

On a plateau above a polluted river skirting green houses, allotments, new factories and NCB sludge, the Welfare State settlement a cross between a Bolivian tinmine, 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*. (Mid-Pennine Association for the Arts, press release March 1973)

In 1973, Welfare State International (WSI), a nomadic collective of artists, musicians and performers, set up temporary camp in caravans and lorries on a reclaimed rubbish tip at Heasonford quarry in Burnley on the invitation of Mid-Pennine Arts as part of its innovative arts programme in the community. For *Beauty and The Beast*, they spent three months improvising with junk to create a makeshift labyrinthine environment. In the final event, the audience were invited to roam through this organic structure while WSI acted out a metaphysical theatrical performance through a constant stream of visual evocations and references.

Emerging from the radical politics and cultural ferment of 1968, WSI pioneered the idea of temporary site-specific multi-media performance, celebratory feasting and new forms of processional art. Fire, ice, sound and light provided the raw materials for many of their transient installations. For almost forty years, they continued to develop alternative models of participative art amongst a diverse range of communities and locations, from Barrow-in-Furness to Snake Island, Toronto. Leaving few material traces, WSI were pioneers of the provisional, providing transitory experience and a participative passing-through.

This paper will utilise an extensive ephemeral archive of materials to examine the radicalism of the provisional practices and artforms of WSI. Did WSI's performances and events acquire a place in the social imagination? Can these ephemeral experiences be considered as fragments of cultural memory and social history?