

## **‘New Age’ radicalism and the social imagination: Welfare State International in the Seventies**

### **Introduction – the aesthetic, the visceral and the political**

Lancelot Quail, Britain’s new folk hero (a working-class hermaphrodite strong man) was presumed lost on Her Majesty’s submarine Andrew...after following a mermaid on a ley line trail across SW England last September.....Lancelot Quail is living on a rubbish tip in NW Lancs. Rebuffed by the Department of the Environment, he is trapped in a labyrinth, but is constructing home-made wings and an elaborate radio telescope. Although Lancelot has lost the mermaid for ever, he is still seeking Beauty. The Beast and the Winter Tree King are hunting him down, but with luck on Spring Bank Holiday Monday, he will escape in one time or another....<sup>1</sup>

In 1973, Welfare State International (WSI), a nomadic collective of artists, musicians, poets, performers and engineers, set up their touring caravans and lorries on a reclaimed rubbish tip at Heasandford quarry in Burnley in Lancashire. Mid Pennine Association for the Arts (MPA) invited them to be ‘artists in residence’ as part of an innovative community arts programme which also included Daniel Meadows as resident community photographer.<sup>2</sup> For *Beauty and The Beast*, they spent three months improvising with junk to create a makeshift labyrinthine environment. The audience completed the performance by roaming through this organic structure while WSI created an evocative performance. MPA’s press release described what prospective participants would find there,

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*.<sup>3</sup>

Emerging from the radical politics and culture of 1968, WSI, a constantly changing collective of individual artists, musicians and engineers, 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.

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

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<sup>1</sup>

Welfare State, *Beauty and the Beast*, leaflet, Burnley, 19th – 28th May 1973

<sup>2</sup> Author’s conversation with Meadows. Meadows toured England in the Free Photographic Omnibus (1973-74), and his book, *Living Like This - Around Britain In The Seventies*, was published in 1975. In the summer of 2007 his work was included in Tate Britain’s landmark photography exhibition *How We Are, Photographing Britain*.

<sup>3</sup> Mid Pennine Association for the Arts, press release, March 1973

making that powerful conjunction available to people who have no interest in theatres or plays.<sup>4</sup>

Their work ranged from making community films such as *King Real and the Hoodlums* (1983) and creating extravagant pyrotechnic spectacles such as *Parliament in Flames* to running workshops and making small-scale interventions, engaging with ordinary people on housing estates, in workplaces and schools.

This paper is part of a more extensive research project which will explore the legacies and networks of influence of WSI's activities over almost forty years. It will situate their practices within the context of recent communitarian discourses, a post-politics 'ethical turn' and the focus on participation, collaboration and art collectives which emerged as a critical debate in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The writings of Nicholas Bourriaud, Grant Kester and Claire Bishop<sup>6</sup> on issues to do with 'participation', in conjunction with the ideas of Jacques Rancière, Giorgio Agambon and Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>7</sup> on politics, aesthetics and community, offer a significant conceptual framework for re-viewing WSI, a collective which continued to develop alternative models of participative art amongst a diverse range of communities and international locations.

Leaving relatively few material traces, WSI pioneered provisional multimedia practice, providing transitory creative experiences within the communities in which they settled and through which they passed. Here, however, I specifically want to examine the 'radicalism' of the practices and artforms of WSI in the 1970s when they took up an artistic 'residency' in Burnley between 1973 and 1978. This, for me, is the most interesting and significant period of their activities for the social, political and cultural questions it raises. How did WSI's 'participative' events operate with and within communities? What were the aesthetic, ethical, political and social aspects and implications of such 'collaborative' practices? Did WSI's ephemeral performances and events acquire a place in the social imagination and cultural memory? Indeed, how, if at all, was WSI an agent of radical social and political transformation – how did they effect and affect social and cultural relations? Where was the political located? What – if anything - was radical about it ?

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<sup>4</sup> Tony Coult, *Plays and Players*, May 1976, pp. 20-23.

<sup>5</sup> WSI operated in various forms and with different personnel from 1968 to 2006. In 2008, I curated a retrospective exhibition, *Radical Mayhem: Welfare State International and its Followers* at Mid Pennine Gallery, Burnley, 26 April -7 June 2008; currently, I am planning a further research project in collaboration with the Theatre Collection at the University of Bristol which holds an extensive WSI archive.

<sup>6</sup> See Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', *Artforum*, February 2006 available at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_6\\_44/ai\\_n26767773](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_6_44/ai_n26767773) and Claire Bishop (ed.), *Participation, Documents of Contemporary Art*, London: Whitechapel/MIT Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> See Bishop, *ibid.*, and Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, [first published as *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*, 2000], trans. and introduction Gabriel Rockhill, London/New York: Continuum, 2006, Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, [orig. *La comunità che viene*, 1990] [trans. Michael Hardt], Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 and Peter Connor (ed), Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, [orig. 1986], Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991

## **The Seventies and 1968**

WSI was founded in 1968, a moment currently undergoing reassessment, forty years on.<sup>8</sup> The significance of '1968' sits uneasily in the popular imagination, bound by myth and cliché yet profoundly marked by liberatory discourses and revolutionary politics. Kristin Ross has iterated the 'moment' of May 1968 as a 'discursive and syntactic jumble' which has come to incorporate 'everything and therefore nothing'.<sup>9</sup> Ross discusses sociological interpretations of May 1968 which verge on the tautological: answering the charge that 'nothing happened', she comments that 'everything happened'. Undoubtedly, the apparent 'failure' of 1968 had enormous repercussions and ramifications for social, cultural and political imaginaries.

Most importantly for our purposes here though, it was the following decade, the 1970s, which was profoundly marked by the confusions and disappointments, reversals and desertions of 1968. Despite the extensive attention paid to it, rather than in 1968 itself, 'real politics' came in the aftermath of the 'failed' revolution - in the neglected 'undecade' of the Seventies.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, a range of art practices in Britain in the 1970s were highly politicised, as John A. Walker has outlined in some detail in one of the few surveys of this period.<sup>11</sup> John Hilliard commented in 1981,

It was a decade of austere radical art, severely ascetic in its uncompromising purity, the product of a cultural moment when a generation of young artists genuinely seized the time, exerting seminal influence in an international arena...what remained consistent was a determined commitment to the present, an egalitarian spirit and an almost cavalier disinterest in money...<sup>12</sup>

Marxist orientated ideas were preponderant, Althusserian re-readings and Maoism informed practices. Art itself became, to cite a clichéd but contemporaneously pertinent phrase, a 'site of struggle'. Of course, revolutionary politics was sectarian and divisive in the 1970s but some activists asserted that art did, after all, have a role in initiating or executing social change: Victor Burgin put up posters on housing estates in Newcastle; David Medalla, John Dugger and others started The Artists' Liberation Front in London, unfurling banners with Marxist-Leninist slogans.<sup>13</sup> For others, the ultimate political weapon was to make no art at all: in 1974, Gustav Metzger called for an art strike to take place 1977-80 with the aim of 'crippling the

<sup>8</sup> In 2008, the phenomenon of '1968' has been re-evaluated and referenced in the mass media, popular press and within the academy in Britain, Europe and globally – see, for example, the inter-disciplinary conference, *1968: A Global Perspective*, due to be held at University of Austin, Texas, 10-12 October 2008.

<sup>9</sup> See Kristin Ross, *May 68 and its Afterlives*, University of Chicago Press, 2002 in which she discusses various viewpoints of the social, political and institutional impact of 1968.

<sup>10</sup> See Introduction in John A. Walker, *Left Shift- Radical Art in 1970s Britain*, London: IB Tauris, 2002, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> See Walker, *ibid.* for a year-by-year account of practices and events.

<sup>12</sup> Hilliard, quoted in Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> In the summer of 1976, Victor Burgin put up his posters, *What does possession mean to you*, around Newcastle upon Tyne; David Medalla and others showed at Gallery House, an experimental space run by Sigi Krauss, 1972-73. On Medalla, see Guy Brett, *Exploding Galaxies, The Art of David Medalla*, London: Kala, 1995

capitalist system'. A special 1976 issue of *Studio International*, devoted to 'Art and Social Purpose', reflected the range of political positions adopted. The editorial warned that artists could not afford to operate in a 'vacuum of specialised discourse without considering their function in wider and more utilitarian terms', arguing,

...never, ever forget that means must have an *end* and that this end is inextricably bound up with art's responsibility to contact and nourish the wider audience it now ignores at its peril...the short-winded, rootless history of modernism's attempts to evolve an art directly expressive of its own zeitgeist will terminate in a cul-de-sac overpopulated by myopic, self-obsessed artists with nowhere, finally, to go. <sup>14</sup>

Whether this was political engagement or dilletantism is not my concern here, but it does provide plenty of evidence of emergent political avant-gardes and artistic activism, much of it reflecting and responding to industrial strife and political violence on an international scale, exacerbated, for example, by the struggles for civil rights in Northern Ireland and the campaigns of the Angry Brigade in the UK. <sup>15</sup>

The aftermath of 1968 provided an intensified political context in Britain with the 1970s characterised by increasing working class militancy. <sup>16</sup> In a short article published in 1979, David Widgery pondered the political legacies of 1968. <sup>17</sup> By 1979, revolutionary fervour had dissipated into the 'winter of discontent': the miners' strikes in 1972 and 1974, along with waves of industrial action by dockers and engineers, had brought down the Heath government and Labour had been installed in 1974 with their most radical post-war election manifesto - provoking Widgery to comment that 'revolution did seem in the air somewhere.' <sup>18</sup> All this had achieved little but mass unemployment and, with whole regions 'slipping off the industrial map', he remarked,

Go to Liverpool Wigan or Skelmersdale and see the bleakness in the streets and the despair in the faces...jobs gone for good, skills made useless, redundancy pay that melts away ..now the cuts are a codeword for a social counter-revolution...[....]...One doesn't have to be a punk or gay to feel that the UK in 1979 has turned out rather less appetising than the menu promised in 1974 of Social Contract flambéd in 'the red flame of socialist outrage'. Our new Jerusalem has turned out a harsher meaner poorer Britain. <sup>19</sup>

And, reiterating the bleak lyrics from a track on Tom Robinson's album, *The Winter of 79*,

Consternation in Mayfair  
Rioting in Notting Hill Gate

<sup>14</sup> 'Editorial', *Studio International – Art and Social Purpose*, March/April 1976, p. 94

<sup>15</sup> See Jean Weir, *The Angry Brigade 1967-1984, Documents and Chronology*, London: Elephant Editions, 1985.

<sup>16</sup> For a general social/cultural histories of the period see Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics*, London: Methuen, 1997 and Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000*, London: Pan/MacMillan, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> David Widgery, 'The Winter of 1979', [orig. published in *Timeout* 1979] in *Preserving Disorder*,

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

Fascists marching up the High Street  
Carving up the Welfare State....<sup>20</sup>

### **Welfare State International (WSI) in Burnley**

*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>21</sup>

The setting up of the Welfare State collective in 1968 was largely the creative vision of its founder and artistic director, John Fox, then a lecturer and librarian at Bradford College of Art. The politics of radical activism and anarchism had an input 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>22</sup> WSI proclaimed an 'alternative aesthetics', a hybrid approach which brought together Jungian archetypal myth-making, a Blakeian vision typically reflected in Sixties' Pop and English counterculture along with a rhetoric of magic and ritual .

The Welfare State make images, invent rituals, devise ceremonies, objectify the unpredictable, establish and enhance atmospheres for particular places, times, situations and people.....[...]...

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.<sup>23</sup>

Variously described as 'dream-weavers, purveyors of images, sculptors of visual poetry, civic magicians and engineers of the imagination'<sup>24</sup>, WSI's activities were an amalgam of feasting, music-making and performance which resonate with the amorphous notion of 'New Ageism', a cultural phenomenon particularly, though not exclusively, associated with the Seventies – and one yet to be extensively researched and theorised.<sup>25</sup> The eclectic set of activities

<sup>20</sup> Lyrics from Tom Robinson's *Up Against the Wall*, quoted in Widgery, *op.cit.*

<sup>21</sup> *The Tenth Anniversary of Welfare State* booklet 1978.

<sup>22</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/>

<sup>23</sup> Excerpt from *The Welfare State Manifesto*, 1972

<sup>24</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>25</sup> There is a wealth of literature on Sixties' 'counterculture' but little in-depth analysis specifically of the intellectual and ideological roots and development of the eclectic cultural 'New Age' phenomenon of the Seventies. However, useful are Mark Ivor Satin's contemporaneous *New Age Politics*, Delta Books, 1976 and more recent studies include Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement*, London:

and practices which constitute the 'New Age' – or the 'Age of Aquarius', as it was labelled in the 1960s and 70s – does not lend itself to precise definition and tends to be used as an umbrella term. For Paul Heelas, a fundamental characteristic of New Ageism is a shared *lingua franca* to do with 'self-spirituality' – and he outlines and explores a resurgence of teachings and practices associated with 'the mystic, magician and shaman' which he suggests was partly a response to a cultural loss of certainty but, paradoxically, was also 'a product of established orders of modernity'.<sup>26</sup> Despite the slipperiness of the term and the spectrum of practices which it can incorporate - from 'wilderness events' and Zen meditation to 'enlightenment intensive seminars' and management training events - Heelas asserts that,<sup>27</sup>

....in large measure, New Age is a *radicalised* rendering of more familiar assumptions and values.....The prosperity wing aside, the New Age provides a spiritual – and thus radicalised – rendering of the assumptions and values of humanistic expressivism.

The imagery and narratives used by WSI certainly resonated with traits and values associated with the *radicalised* wing of New Age culture outlined by Heelas. In 1973, a reviewer for *Theatre Quarterly* wrote,

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>28</sup>

Despite the references to ritual, myth and magic, it is evident from their early statements and activities that their ethos was rooted in the revolutionary politics and emancipatory ideals 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. The Situationists gave primacy to the role of 'play' in social life and viewed urban space as an environment for participative performance and games. 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>29</sup>

With a whole range of activities dedicated to 'play' and emancipation through self-expression and creativity, WSI used the political form of the 'manifesto' to explain their aims through the Seventies. Rather than making overtly political demands though, they argued that their objective was to provide alternative 'state' support for the welfare of the imagination.<sup>30</sup>

WSI's repertoire was extensive but the kinds of multimedia practices they adopted were established by the start of the Seventies. Besides drawing on popular traditions such as mummery and pantomime, WSI also incorporated

Blackwell, 1996 (focuses on 'popular' values, aspirations and practices) and Daren Kemp, *New Age: A Guide*, Edinburgh University Press, 2004

<sup>26</sup> Heelas, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Heelas, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>28</sup> J.Hammond, *Theatre Quarterly*, October 1973.

<sup>29</sup> Guy Debord quoted in Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, MIT press, p. 105.

<sup>30</sup> See note 23

the avant-gardism of Yves Klein, Fluxus, Joseph Beuys and John Cage. WSI created happenings, events or assembled environments with acrobats, jazz, light shows and film. Performances might involve wrestlers, musicians, fire-eaters, dancers, expanding on a basis of rehearsed material through improvisational techniques. In 1972, Jamie Proud's alter-ego, Lancelot Quail, later billed as 'Britain's new folk hero (a working-class hermaphrodite strong-man)' <sup>31</sup> appeared at Surrey Hall in Brixton and became a recurring reference point for the company. In September 1972, the company spent a month conducting the *Travels of Lancelot Quail*, a kind of processional theatrical event which roved from Glastonbury through Somerset, Devon and Cornwall, to end on a submarine off Land's End. A year later, after an aborted plan to hold an exhibition and event at the Serpentine Gallery in London, <sup>32</sup> WSI drove their entourage of vehicles into Burnley – a Northern working-class mill-town with a rapidly growing Asian population and a rapidly declining industrial base <sup>33</sup> and initiated their five-year residency as artists in the community. <sup>34</sup>

In the 1970s, Burnley was a community in transition, a community in a state of becoming, as Jean-Luc Nancy has noted, 'community is always coming, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity.' <sup>35</sup> Into this evolving community Welfare State created its own ever-changing nomadic community of artists, musicians and performers - a self-contained and self-sustaining community of growing families. With a commitment to contemporary ideas on Seventies 'progressive' education and the burgeoning 'Free School' movement, WSI decided to set up its own school. Some members of the collective registered as 'home teachers' and the company opened its own school in April 1975. <sup>36</sup>

One of the first projects at the new Burnley base, *Beauty and The Beast* – was the creation of a ramshackle junk environment as the backdrop for a performed narrative featuring the mythic figure, Lancelot Quail. In November 1973, WSI created its first large-scale bonfire event which later evolved into *Parliament in Flames* staged in Burnley in 1976 with an audience of 10,000 people and restaged in various other towns through the 1970s. <sup>37</sup> One of the events in Burnley, a processional performance event, was filmed by Michael

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<sup>31</sup> See Welfare State, *Beauty and the Beast*, exhibition leaflet, Burnley, May 1973

<sup>32</sup> It failed to materialise when the Department of the Environment refused to allow performances and moving sculptures in the gardens at the Serpentine Gallery.

<sup>33</sup> In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Burnley was the largest producer of cotton cloth in the world. Its industrial strength attracted a large immigrant population in the 1960s and early 70s and today Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities make up approximately 9% of its 88,000 inhabitants.

<sup>34</sup> The collective of various artists and musicians included Boris Howarth as Associate Artistic Director and Lol Coxhill, improvising jazz musician and composer, as WSI's Musical Director. Other members included

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *op.cit.*, p. 71

<sup>36</sup> The company itself was used as a primary educational resource and the ethos was based around providing a well-structured child-centred educational experience that developed creativity and imagination. One of the troupe, Catherine Kiddle, recounted the schools history and educational roots in Catherine Kiddle, *What shall we do with the children?* Devon: Spindlewood, 1981, see p. 25 and p. 32

<sup>37</sup> It was also staged at Milton Keynes (1978), Ackworth (1979), Tamworth (1980) and, finally, Catford (1981) with 15,000 spectators.

Kustow for London Weekend TV's 'flagship' arts programme *Aquarius*.<sup>38</sup>

Kustow's documentary-style film is particularly evocative: the narrator gives a brief history of WSI, the camera scans and focuses in on the encampment at Stoneyholme, a particularly socially-deprived area of Burnley. Subsequently, the production team film the instigation and development of *Alien*, following WSI's 'blood-soaked colonial band' through the terraced streets at dusk to the finale, the ritualistic burning of an ice-figure (containing Lancelot Quail's lost spirit) and a scene which incites the swarming local crowd to destroy a giant slug representing the capitalist 'forces of oppression'. An interesting scene shows a group of local children on the WSI site, enthusiastically and imaginatively engrossed in making props, building a tower and flying kites. The group giggle self-consciously as the 'well-spoken' interviewer quizzes them about their activities. With natural spontaneity, one of the young boys suddenly becomes quite serious; he looks up into the sky and says he would love to fly up with the kite and feels sure that, if he did, he would be able to see Blackpool. It is a moment of penetrating poignancy.

The Burnley<sup>39</sup> residency 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>40</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, the Burnley base was dismantled and, eventually, WSI moved on to develop a more permanent base in Cumbria. WSI passed through and into the space of cultural memory.<sup>41</sup> These hybrid multimedia performances and improvisational events brought together a New Age miscellany of ancient mythologies, traditional folk and contemporary popular and avant-garde cultural forms. Ascertaining its impact on the cultural and collective memory of participants and audiences will be a complex task and further research will address this. But what exactly was radical or political about WSI?

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<sup>38</sup> Whilst at Burnley, in 1974 WSI also made their first permanent earthwork at Gawthorpe Hall and their first giant icework at Wath-upon-Deane. The following year, they created *Harbinger*, a large-scale sculpture from scrapyards junk and rusty cars, for the International Performance Festival in Birmingham city centre.

<sup>39</sup> 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.

<sup>40</sup> Tony Coult and Baz Kershaw (eds), *Engineers of the Imagination, The Welfare State Handbook* [1983], London: Methuen, 1990, p. 245.

<sup>41</sup> Initially, the Fox family went on a residency to Australia. WSI established itself first in Liverpool and then from 1983 onwards in Barrow-in-Furness and, finally, Ulverston where it had a long-term base, Lanternhouse. For further information on WSI's subsequent activities see, *Radical Mayhem: Welfare State International and its Followers*, exhibition catalogue, Mid Pennine Gallery, Burnley, 26 April - 7 June 2008 and Tony Coult and Baz Kershaw (eds), *Engineers of the Imagination, The Welfare State Handbook* [1983], London: Methuen, 1990. Also see <http://www.welfare-state.org/> and <http://www.bris.ac.uk/theatreollection/welfarestate.html>

### **A nomadic space of possibility**

Interestingly, 'myth' is often seen as a reactionary, conservative form but, in the 1930s, Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois developed a discourse around the revolutionary potential of myth. They shared George Sorel's understanding of myth as a form of activism. According to them, myth's stroking of 'the primordial longings and conflicts of the individual condition transposed to the social dimension'<sup>42</sup> could move subjects to action. They argued it could initiate a 'psychological activism' and facilitate what Gavin Grindon calls a 'leap into the impossible', an idea to which I will return.

The very practice of working collaboratively could be seen as a challenge to the political status quo and the social primacy of the individual – and WSI's collective ethos was part of what Baz Kershaw has alluded to as 'a rare attempt to evolve an oppositional popular culture.'<sup>43</sup> Collectivist tactics can be a political statement and there are plenty of historical incidences of collectivism standing against individualism.<sup>44</sup> But some caveats are needed here: the radicalism of the collective is undergoing a fashionable reiteration currently in academic and critical circles as Blake Stimpson and Gregory Sholette contend in their recent book on collectivist art, modernism and the social imagination.<sup>45</sup> In terms of contemporary practice, Grant Kester has written on the disparate network of artists and artists' collectives working at the intersection of art and cultural activism.<sup>46</sup> He also reminds us that artists hold a compromised position in society and that a healthy scepticism is needed about claims that aesthetic experience can transform consciousness. Nevertheless, Kester argues 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>47</sup>

With the fashion for participation, collectives and all things 'relational' à la Bourriaud, a note of scepticism is needed. The collective, *per se*, is not intrinsically radical or revolutionary - communes in the Seventies were often isolating and regressive places as inequities embedded within gender power relations often persisted despite a rhetoric of sexual liberation. In Burnley, WSI did not liberate the nuclear family unit within its own community but, even so, it was much more than just an artists' collective as it did represent an attempt to envision and enact new ways of living and relating and some of these practices can be viewed as radical to some extent.

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<sup>42</sup> The Caillois 'college of sociology' (1937-39) is referred to and Sorel quoted in Gavin Grindon essay p 95-96

<sup>43</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance – Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, London/New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Diggers Kenneth rexroth etc

<sup>45</sup> Blake Stimpson and Gregory Sholette, *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, 2007, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> See Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

With its commitment to self-sufficiency, the development of ecological and alternative rites of passage and a de-schooled emancipatory home education it was as much a social as an artistic experiment. Certainly, 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>48</sup>

For me, another primary site of Welfare State's radicalism was the framework which they provided for the exploration of the potentially insurgent and subversive power of the social imagination. As cultural catalysts, their activities highlighted the potential for art to emancipate individual human creativity and initiate or contribute to socio-political change. The idea of the imagination being radical and political is connected to its potential for envisioning 'beyond' ones' current situation and circumstances, thereby opening up potentiality and possibility. By exposing audiences to sensations that go beyond everyday perceptions and opinions, I would contend that art practices are able to open up new ways of thinking about and engaging with the world: they offer a space of 'creative criticality' - both for the individual and for a community of individuals, with all the caveats about what might constitute a 'community'. In the Sixties and Seventies, these ideas resonated with the ideas about the liberation of the imagination in Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1967) which was highly influential at the time. WSI's transitory performative experiences had a profound effect on particular individuals who came into contact with it and there is evidence that it has remained in the cultural memory and popular imagination, within and outside the communities touched. They created environments in which anything seemed possible and constructed events which assaulted the senses. They produced *affect*, 'a non-conscious experience of intensity...a moment of unformed and unstructured potential' and, as Deleuze and Guattari have contended, an aspect of art which is potentially revolutionary.<sup>49</sup>

As Gavin Grindon comments in his essay *The Breath of the Possible*,

The open nature of these vital moments of affect allows us to grasp the virtuality and possibility of the space of practical political engagement...[they enable us] a way to navigate the space between bare-faced utopianism and blank impossibility...<sup>50</sup>

Finally, and perhaps more controversially, there is the revolutionary power and merits of disorder. In his classic study of city life, *The Uses of Disorder*, Richard Sennett argued for the paradoxical fruitfulness of disorder and disruption in everyday life as a positive, energising and creative force.<sup>51</sup> WSI

<sup>48</sup> See note 41 for sources and also John Fox and Sue Gill's website at [www.deadgoodguides.com](http://www.deadgoodguides.com)

<sup>49</sup> Brian Massumi, 'Translator's Forward: Pleasures of Philosophy' in Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, [1980] Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987.

<sup>50</sup> Gavin Grindon, 'The Breath of the Possible', Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber (eds) *Constituent Imagination, Militant Investigations Collective Theorizations*, Oakland: AK Press, 2007, p. 106

<sup>51</sup> See Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder*, New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1970

catalysed disorder with their processions, festivals and spontaneous performances - they were agents of, in Bhaktian terms, and as Baz Kershaw has argued, 'carnavalesque resistance'.<sup>52</sup> Hence, the festival or carnival is viewed as operating as a form of resistance, it represents non-conformity, the disheavelling of order. It is worth being circumspect here though: this notion is susceptible to romanticisation and nostalgia for alternative forms of historical oppositional activity must not suppress the possibility that these social forms can act as safety valves to avoid any real social and political change being initiated.

However, with the provisional fermenting and disheavelling of order, in my view, WSI created what Hakim Bey has described as a Temporary Autonomous Zone, or TAZ, a transitory pirate utopia<sup>53</sup> - a space which enables the fleeting suspension of usual rules and mores. Again then, I would contend that WSI provided not only a *space of creative criticality* but also a *nomadic space of possibility*. Essentially WSI enabled and facilitated an alternative temporary zone which was potentially transformatory. It contained Grindon's 'breath of the possible'.

Gillian Whiteley  
September 2008

## Images

Fig 1 ***Welfare State Aims***, 1972. Photo: Roger Perry

Fig 2 ***Welfare State at Stoneyholme, Burnley***, 1973. Photo: Roger Perry

Fig 3 ***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.

Fig 4 ***Welfare State in Blackburn***, 1977. Photo: Daniel Meadows

Fig 5 ***Centre pages of Tenth Anniversary Welfare State booklet***, 1978

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<sup>52</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>53</sup> Hakim Bey, 'From TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone' in Stephen Duncombe, (ed) *Cultural Resistance Reader*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 113