

A Restless Art

Welfare State International

A case study of participatory art



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With photography by Daniel Meadows

Supported by



Acknowledgements:

John Fox, Sue Gill, Daniel Meadows, Pete Moser, Jamie Proud, Jenny Wilson
Photography by Daniel Meadows (www.photobus.co.uk) pages 14-17, Sue Gill (8b), John Fox (6), Casey Orr (9) and François Matarasso (1, 4, 8a and 12).

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First published in digital form in 2018 by
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Publication date 1 May 2018

WELFARE STATE INTERNATIONAL

The end of Welfare State

LONGLINE:

the carnival opera,

AN ALL-SINGING ALL-DANCING

family show about Morecambe Bay

IN A CIRCUS BIG TOP.

Wild Theatre! Rousing Songs! Stunning Films! Magic!

Acrobats! Stilt Walkers! Dancers! Fire Sculptures!

WSI's LAST EVER GIG!

SATURDAY SOLD OUT!

Ulverston is a country town a mile or two from Morecambe Bay, in North West England. On a Saturday evening in March 2006, crowds are gathering for *Longline*, the last community show by a group of artists that has been resident here for 25 years, Welfare State International (WSI). There's a circus tent with bright banners snapping in the breeze, and drummers pounding away. Inside, people settle on benches around the ring, as communities have gathered to share stories since time immemorial.

The show that unfolds over the next three hours draws on all that Welfare State is known for: puppetry, song, myth, fire, drama, film, acrobatics, poetry and fantastical engineering. A vision is spun of a shoreline place and its history, the people and creatures who made it their home, and the delicate balance they struck—and might lose—between their desires and deep nature. Imaginary beasts pass ocean liners, an ancient rock splits to become a boat for a puppet crew, sea creatures mingle with rabbits and birds, coloured silks unfurl into waves, a choir sings, aerialists spin overhead...

Ragged around the edges, chaotic, unfinished and untamed, all the wobbly bits are in plain view. But it is so full of invention and puppetry, it makes *The Lion King* look cheap and dowdy.¹

We move outside for the finale, with fireworks, lanterns and the glowing white sculpture of a boat bearing a heron, a prehistoric elk and two halves of the moon. This is an unique aesthetic honed by Welfare State over decades, an art of community ritual that can produce wonder and delight. It can also fall on its face, but that's stilt-walking for you. Not everything works because it mustn't. Without uncertainty, without risk, there is neither art nor life. Careless of theatrical convention, this

performance creates its own sense, subverting rationality and connecting to deeper, elemental things. But you must trust your experience.



Longline Opera Finale, 2006

Last nights are always emotional, but this one has a special tone of melancholy. We really are saying goodbye. Fireworks close the show and bring down the curtain on Welfare State too. After nearly 40 years, the company is ending its strange, beautiful journey in a business park in Ulverston.

Way to go.

The beginning of Welfare State

That final performance was everything Welfare State stood for. It was impossible to say who was a professional and who was not, or to know how this story without an author had come about. There was a place for all who wanted one. Over the decades, their work encompassed street theatre, intimate ceremonial, huge public spectacles and everyday community art. But if each piece was different, it was always, unmistakably, the expression of a singular artistic vision and aesthetic. Its roots were deep in the tradition of English art. Blake's prophetic vision, Hogarth's political dyspepsia, Dickens' exuberant fecundity and Spencer's sacred everyday are evident, but so is music hall, commercial art and folk practice. This art was highly original, but its originality was partly in its reinvention of existing, often neglected ideas, forms, practices and traditions.

John Fox and Sue Gill met at school in Hull. After college (Oxford and Cambridge respectively) and the interruption of National Service, they settled in rural North Yorkshire where Sue was head of a primary school and John studied Fine Art in Newcastle. In Helmsley, they were befriended by the philosopher Herbert Read, and the playwrights John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy, whose radical ideas nourished

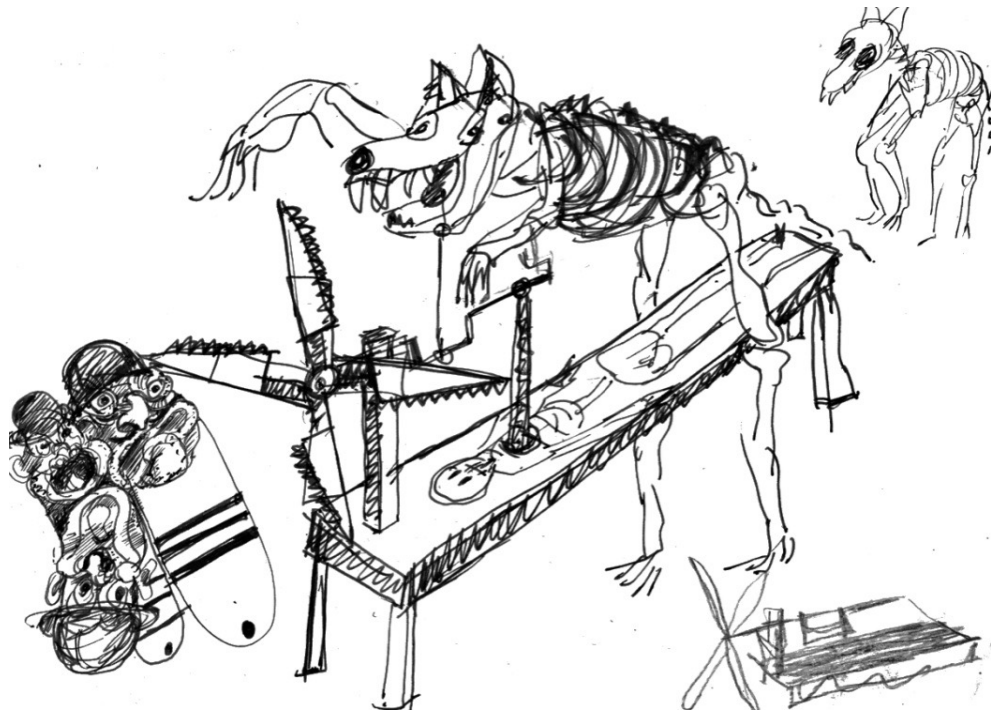
the young couple's disillusion with art in 1960s Britain. They began to create small community events in the School House at Hawnby, attracting other young artists, including Arnold Wesker, Adrian Mitchell and Albert Hunt. At Bradford College of Art, Hunt was already developing ideas about theatre, art and politics that would lead to the first community arts degree course in Britain. He invited Fox and Gill to work at the college, where they began to explore performance. In 1968, they started Welfare State with some of their students. A style of work emerged from the creative interplay of their artistic ideas, practical constraints and audience reactions. They devised short street plays drawn from Punch and Judy or the Arabian Nights, working quickly and adapting constantly:

'The street was the most honest situation because there was no contract with your audience whatsoever. They were just coming out of the Co-op in their lunchbreak, and they might stop or they might not. You had to entrance them and hold them. They were perfectly free to walk off at any moment. We'd ask, "Why do people always go at that point?" It's gone boring, so we'd quickly go round the back of the truck and re-edit. "Well, we'll do that song there and then we'll do that, but cut that bit out." You were just honing it all the time.'

Sue Gill

They lived collectively in a nomadic village of caravans in Burnley for 5 years (1973-78) touring an increasingly sophisticated theatre carnival. New people came, stayed a while and left, came back, fell out, made up, carried on. Each one brought new ideas, skills and interests. The shows got bigger and more ambitious, but money was always tight so materials were begged or borrowed. (Even in the 1990s, when the company was settled in Ulverston and relatively prosperous, John Fox remembers a man behind a shop counter giving him his overalls to use in a production.) Scrap was recycled and adapted. New techniques were invented, such as the use of withies (willow sticks used in basket making) to make light structures that could be covered with paper, like lanterns and giant puppets for outdoor performances. So pervasive have these techniques become in British community arts that it is hard to remember that they once had to be imagined.

Welfare State had no wish to perform in theatres or galleries or to adopt their production values. Working out of doors shaped their aesthetic. They learned how fire sculptures and lanterns could transform a site and touch depths of human feeling often neglected by modern technology. They could also connect with traditions like Bonfire Night and make them at once more up to date and more ancient. The shows got bigger and more ambitious. In 1981, in a park in South London, 15,000 people came to watch a political allegory that ended with the burning of the Houses of Parliament (in effigy). After that, they raised the Titanic. Invitations to theatre festivals abroad came in, and they became Welfare State International. But the role of jet set jesters was becoming part of the art world Fox and Gill had turned against 20 years earlier.



: 'Wolf Whirligig', drawing by John Fox

The Last Wolf

After the Crusades he killed the last wolf of England.

"One infidel is as good as another."

So,

in romantic paradise
wilderness was anaesthetized.

Children acquired Wordsworth goggles
lest black thorns scratch their eyes,
while Nature was reduced
to television size.

Yet ghost prints are on the beach
and wilderness is in the wood, lurking
in coughing fits of blood.

John Fox²

The community art of Welfare State

People would go, "Oh, great. It's alright for you. You piss off and we're stuck here." We were realising that there was no future in just that hit and run stuff. We should have been there for a year, not a fortnight. We got very disillusioned with being invited here or there. Okay, you did make a connection during that week or two at a superficial level but there was no way you could sustain them.'

Sue Gill

This rag, tag and bobtail carnival of unruly artists taking their alternative ideas to streets, parks and village halls might not seem much like community art. And sometimes, it wasn't. In the pioneer years, no one quite knew what community art was, though some thought they knew what it ought to be. It was enough to follow intuition and desire, to try things out and discover what worked. But Welfare State's spirit was always in community art because they were open to everyone and interested in what they could contribute. Many of those who gravitated to Welfare State were not artists when they came, though they might be when they left, whether they stayed years or just a few hours. Still, settling down in Ulverston changed everything again.



Whirligig flock of corncrakes (Sue Gill)

Welfare State's 1969 manifesto sought 'an Alternative, an Entertainment and a Way of Life'. In 1979, they came to Cumbria at the invitation of an arts administrator and never left. They worked first in Barrow-in-Furness, an industrial town at the end of Morecambe Bay, where Britain's nuclear submarines are built. By then John and Sue had two children and were looking to settle them in school: they chose

Ulverston. Over time, Welfare State's work focused more and more on the town and surrounding area. The work produced there was less spectacular but ever more rooted in place and community. They felt the difference of building long term relationships. When they worked away, it was increasingly on community celebrations, like the Bolton street carpeted for a day of playful performances. At home, they began an annual lantern procession in 1983 that has become an independent part of the town's life, with ever-more ambitious creations.

Sadly, this story doesn't have a happy ending, or at least not here. In Ulverston, for the first time in its existence the nomadic circus of Welfare State settled down and took on a former Victorian school as its base. In 1999, the building was refurbished with public funds, to provide gallery and performance space, studios, workshops, accommodation and a unique library. For John Fox, Lanternhouse was a 'gathering point for creative souls in the manner of a traditional but secular parish church'. Among the memorable events created from this base was a sculptural elegy for Cumbria's Foot and Mouth Disease tragedy, a Vigil for the Millennium, installations about the micro-marine life of Morecambe Bay, lantern parades, concerts, exhibitions and carnival adventures.



The Lanternhouse in 2006

Lanternhouse facilitated some extraordinary work and extended WSI's life but it had inherent difficulties and contradictions. The institutionalisation of the company, with all its legal, personnel and funding obligations, made Sue and John more managers than artists. There was a growing demand for the outdoor performance work pioneered by WSI, but commissioners often mistook bought-in spectacle for community creation. Like other artists before them, Welfare State had changed the art world, but were not very keen on the result.

John and Sue were drawn to other issues, including the environment, and other practices, including new rituals and secular ceremonies for rites of passage. So, on April Fool's Day 2006, after Longline's final fireworks, they archived WSI, passed the Lanternhouse to a new company, and returned to the roots of community art, working with small groups from their home on the shore of Morecambe Bay. Now in their late seventies, they keep searching for new ways of being artists, with others, with respect, in and of the world.³



White Hare spindle vane (Casey Orr)

The politics of Welfare State

'I remember being asked why we were called 'Welfare State' and I said, "Well, people have got free teeth and free coffins. Why don't they have free art?" We called ourselves that and it was of socialist intent, but, although we dealt occasionally with issues, it wasn't issue-based. It wasn't didactic. We offered assistance to the National Imagination.'

John Fox

Welfare State's politics were emotional, not ideological. They were rooted in feelings about people, social justice, interdependency and, increasingly, respect for nature. WSI might set fire to parliament or make community theatre about disarmament in the home of the nuclear submarine industry, but the work was driven by moral

indignation rather than political theory. In the 1970s, some saw this approach as a critical weakness in community arts and the question became a fierce debate between opposing sides.

Today, it is easier to see the group's unflagging commitment to social justice, human flourishing and respect for all life. As the rhetoric fades with failing memories, it is the belief in people and the wish to be together in a shared creative activity that remains. John Fox and Sue Gill have never lost their faith in others, their respect for different kinds of creativity or their belief that everyone has a contribution to make and a right to make it. Their socialism has been expressed in working to give others the chance, the space, the confidence to discover what they can imagine. That has always been the heart of community art. And what should artists do but make art that expresses and enacts their moral vision of existence?

The art of Welfare State

Brave people with big eyes. [...] Maybe the Road of Excess led them to the Palace of Wisdom.

Adrian Mitchell⁴

But the political vision, love of improvisation, creative bravery and the gift for friendship would not have taken Welfare State far if they had not been rooted in a powerful aesthetic. Welfare State created a distinctive visual and theatrical language, partly shaped by its use of found, recycled and cheap materials. By necessity and by choice, they worked beyond the language of mainstream production values. In doing so they had to invent formal and technical solutions that expressed their alternative vision of art at every turn. Welfare State artists made wild beauty of necessity, reconnecting communities with half-forgotten rituals through poetry, music, images and the physical presence of the world. .

Its use in community art was new and deeply influential, but it also belongs in the singular English tradition of artistic visionaries like Turner, Samuel Palmer and Stanley Spencer—unruly, exuberant and bursting with life. It is the antithesis of the rationalist and utilitarian that often dominates English culture and would shape the next generation of British community art in the 1990s (and to which WSI would never adapt).

Non-realist or supra-realist, this art glories in excess. It fizzes with joy or righteous anger. It is the art of Mystery Plays and Canterbury Tales, Henry Fielding and Ealing Comedy, D. H. Lawrence and the Who. It reaches for stars and tumbles arse over tip—then picks itself up with a savage grin and a mouthful of mud, laughing at all and itself first. Perhaps because it challenges my Apollonian caution, I love that Dionysian art and feel its need today more than ever.

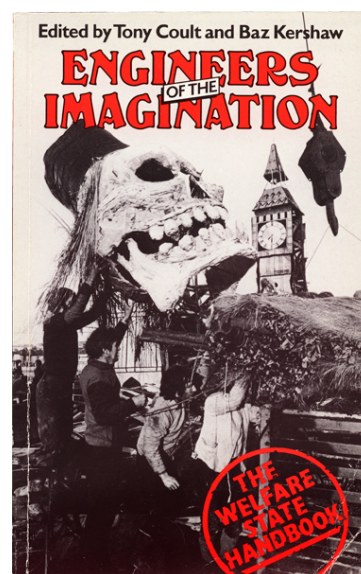
The influence of Welfare State

'We shamelessly used an invitation or a gig to research something that we had absolutely no idea how to do. Literally, it was leaping off the precipice and going, "I'll think of something when I get there, before I get to the bottom." It was like running our own kind of foundation course over three or four years at other people's expense and with an audience.'

Sue Gill

Welfare State was one of the most influential group of artists working in Britain during the last third of the 20th century, though you might not think it from reading art history. It was influential in carving out a territory for art in the midst of life (and sometimes death) reclaiming it for everyone from the Enlightenment's hold. It was influential in creating new forms, such as the lantern parade and the fireshow, and in finding materials and techniques to make them possible. It was influential in defining a visual and performance aesthetic that was rigorous and beautiful but owed nothing to those most valued in mainstream art. It was influential because it showed that you could make work that was complex, original and authentic with regard only to yourself and the people you were working with and still survive in a funding environment that wanted only what it already had.

Welfare State's influence was obvious in its work but it extended in other ways too. One of the most important of these was being a kind of open-access art school. Over the years it attracted thousands of young musicians, actors, artists and others who weren't sure what they were, and gave them space to learn from one another and find their direction. Those people went on to form their own companies or work with others in a sympathetic network that carried WSI's ideas far and wide. To take just one example, my late friend Mike White worked as a company manager with Welfare State in the 1980s before creating a fine community art programme for local government in Gateshead and going to pioneer thinking in the arts and health movement. The family tree of people who have worked or trained with Welfare State would extend to every part of the alternative, community and even mainstream arts in Britain today.



And then there was *Engineers of the Imagination*, *The Welfare State Handbook* published in 1983 just in time for the young community artist I was, working on a housing estate in the English Midlands at the edges of my own competence. I devoured that book—not the text so much but the photos and most of all the drawings

showing how to make lanterns, puppets and fire sculptures. It looked so easy—and it was easy, at least to adapt, recycle, borrow and imitate. In that book WSI extended the space and forms of expression in ways that encouraged anyone to do the same. One of my happiest memories that time was a community play based on Shakespeare's *Tempest* during which the audience were shipwrecked and served a three-course meal. We literally could not have done it without my battered copy of *The Welfare State Handbook*.

Welfare State were inspirational, not just sometimes, not just for a few people, but year after year after year and for almost everyone they touched. Without them, community art in Britain would be different—and poorer.

'We had a snowfall in Ulverston. People started making really wacky snow people, like violinists and big ladies with handbags—Beryl Cook characters. Nothing like your traditional snowmen, not a carrot nose or a top hat in sight. They were wonderful. I went in to Graham's shop and said, "They're wonderful." He said, "It's all your fault. You came here, you lot, and you gave us permission to be crazy.'

John Fox



Environmental sculpture on the foreshore, where John Fox and Sue Gill now work

Links

- Welfare State International – [Archive website](#)
- The page about Welfare State International on the [Unfinished Histories](#) Alternative Theatre History website includes photographs, documents and interviews
- [Dead Good Guides](#) is John Fox and Sue Gill's current website
- John Fox's Manifesto: '[A New Role for the Artist](#)'
- For John Fox's story of Welfare State see [Eyes on Stalks](#) (2002); see also [Engineers of the Imagination](#), by Baz Kershaw and Tony Coulter.
- A [short film](#), by Daniel Meadows, with his photographs of Welfare State between 1976 & 1983, and the voices of John Fox and Sue Gill.
- [Video about 'Longline'](#) by Tomas Suski

Notes

- ¹ 'Ragged around the edges...' from a review by Lyn Gardner, The Guardian, 16 March 2006 <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/mar/16/theatre1>
- ² Poem by John Fox, written to commemorate the death of the last wolf in England, killed in 1350 on Humphrey Head, a finger of land that points into Morecambe Bay; reproduced with permission
- ³ With a new company, Dead Good Guides, they have focused sharing knowledge, collaborative work and small scale community performance. Much of this has centred on rituals and rites of passage, and they have co-written *The Dead Good Book of Namings and Baby Welcoming Ceremonies* (1999) and *The Dead Good Funerals Book* (2004): www.deadgoodguides.com
- ⁴ Adrian Mitchell, writing in the Foreword to *Eyes on Stalks* by John Fox, London 2002, p.viii-ix

Photography by Daniel Meadows

www.photobus.co.uk

Welfare State International.
July 1978. Jamie Proud as Lord
Claude in *Uppendown Mooney*,
written by Adrian Mitchell.
Hill Top, Wennington, Lancashire



Welfare State International.
October 1977. Boris Howarth in
*The Loves, Lives and Murders of
Lancelot Icarus Handyman
Barabbas Quail*. Burnley



Welfare State International.
October 1977. John Fox in
*The Loves, Lives and Murders of
Lancelot Icarus Handyman
Barabbas Quail*. Burnley,



Photography by Daniel Meadows
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Welfare State International.
August 1977.
Brookhouse summer festival,
Blackburn, Lancashire



Welfare State International.
January 1978. Naming ceremony,
Yordas Cave, North Yorkshire



Welfare State International.
January 1978. Naming ceremony,
Hill Top, Wennington, Lancashire



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Welfare State International.
October 1977. *The Loves, Lives
and Murders of Lancelot Icarus
Handyman Barabbas Quail.*
Burnley, Lancashire



Welfare State International.
1 May 1976, Mayday celebration,
Burnley and Barrowford
via the Leeds-Liverpool canal.



Welfare State International.
October 1977. *The Loves, Lives
and Murders of Lancelot Icarus
Handyman Barabbas Quail.*
Burnley, Lancashire



Photography by Daniel Meadows
www.photobus.co.uk

Welfare State International.
November 1976.
Parliament in Flames,
community bonfire before an audience
of 10,000. Burnley, Lancashire



Welfare State International.
August 1977.
Brookhouse summer festival,
Blackburn, Lancashire



Welfare State International.
April 1981. Barn dance,
Palladium Theatre, Millom, Cumbria

