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'Bauhaus of the North'**

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Without Walls: Performance Art and Pedagogy at the ‘Bauhaus of the North’

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Keywords

Performance Art, Art Education, Leeds Polytechnic, Soft Soap

In April 1972, Byron Rogers, a staff writer for the conservative *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, provided his readers with a wide-eyed survey of staff and student work from the Fine Art Department at Leeds Polytechnic.¹ Under the title, ‘Progressive Art or Subsidised Freak Out?’, a lurid inventory of artistic outputs was presented including: 75 flags placed across the English landscape legible from the air in the shape of ‘E-N-G-L-A-N-D,’ a comedy act touring colleges and working men’s clubs, a room in a student flat converted into a large scale chess-board, a Ford Popular car transformed into a working oven for baking bread, a man dressed in Y-fronts and dinner jacket taking photographs of the sky in the street, eyes removed from a pig’s head sewn to the ears of an artist, a maze of black polythene in the concourse of Leeds train station, and a row of telephones painted in British and German military insignia. ‘There is,’ Rogers (1972, 9) writes, ‘something quite distinctive about art students in Leeds’ – an understatement, perhaps, in the wake of such inventory of artistic oddities.² At a time when the majority of art colleges in the country were still offering

¹ I would like to thank Michael Bennett, Ron Crowcroft, Dennis De Groot, Robert Joyce, Gerry Pilgrim, Raym Richards, and Dave Stephens for their extensive help in making this essay possible.

² James Charnley (2015, pp. 194-195) has questioned the accuracy of Rogers’ reporting and accused him of extracting the most odd-ball and outrageous art works, even inventing or exaggerating some elements for effect, in order to portray Leeds as home to a whacky, and ultimately, questionable seam of creativity.

specialised study in the traditional fine art media of painting, sculpture, and print-making, Leeds appeared to have sold its soul to the avant-garde devil, with elements of land, performance, installation and surrealist art to the fore. Its students were not bound to any single tradition or media. Instead they were engaged in open, permissive exploration of creative possibility across the many varied kinds of activity supported by the Polytechnic, which 'in addition to painting and sculpture,' Rogers (1972, 10) tells us, included also 'ceramics, theatre, print-making, film, sound, events or happenings, creative writing, various types of constructional work, conceptual work, plastics, kinetics, and so on.' But, the article asked, was this horizontal variety of activity the simple fact of 'progressive' art-making in 1972? Or was it a dubious hangover of 1960s permissiveness, one that, as a 'subsidised freak out,' Britain could ill afford by the time of the nation's economic downturn in the 1970s?

Such a tendentious line of thinking typified how, at the beginning of the seventies, the so-called 'Leeds experiment' in art education found itself in a challenging environment: pitched between the fading advocates of sixties progressivism, and the gathering forces of the New Right.³ Leeds Polytechnic's Fine Art department appeared sporadically in mainstream media reporting throughout the 1970s, often held up as whipping boy for everything that was purportedly wrong with progressive approaches to art and art education (Daily Mail 1970, Delano 1972, Daily Express 1977). The *Telegraph* article was, in turn, symptomatic of a broader change in cultural outlook identified by Christopher Booker (1980, 5) as definitive of 'the seventies': a decade in which 'the first real death throes' of the belief in human progress could be heard. 'In politics, in the arts or in almost any other field one considers,' he wrote from the vantage point of 1980, 'the prevailing mood was one of a somewhat weary, increasingly conservative, increasingly apprehensive disenchantment.' In fact, for those

³ On the coinage of the 'Leeds experiment' see Manson (2010, p. 34).

wishing to consign the advances, and presumed excesses, of the Sixties to the historical rubbish bin, 1972 offered an opportunity: unemployment reached over one million early that year, the first time since the 1930s, and thus conditions were ripe for an attack on would-be art school crazies, and upon the public-funding supporting them. British art education had largely been seen as a modernising force in 1960s society, and was fully state-funded as a result of the Education Act of 1962, but by the early seventies it had become ‘an economic frill to be trimmed in hard times,’ as Peter Lloyd Jones (1975, 65) put it in the pages of *The Listener*. The idea that some people were having too much fun at the taxpayer’s expense, and that their ‘antics’ resulted in dubious throwaway results – all whilst others were losing their jobs – was an easy hook-line for a reactionary moralising agenda. ‘Higher education, one realises with a jolt, can be fun,’ Rogers (1972, 12) concluded his case, ‘But what will stay when the kissing has to stop?’

For the young Gerry Pilgrim, perusing Rogers’ article on a train to Leeds, her thoughts were less about endings and more about embarking on an exciting new beginning – *en route* as she was to an interview for a place on the Fine Art course at issue. Despite Rogers’ sceptical reporting, Pilgrim (personal communication 26 March 2013) remembers the article as broadly informative of Leeds as ‘the Bauhaus of the North’ rather than any kind of hatchet-job - her enchantment with what she read helping speed her on her way. Pilgrim is co-founder of performance-duo Hesitate and Demonstrate, established with fellow student Janet Godard soon after graduation from Leeds, and, in more recent years, she has worked as a theatre and installation artist under her own name. Pilgrim studied alongside others at Leeds who have similarly made important contributions to art and culture since the 1970s, including Raym Richards, Dennis De Groot, Dave Lewis and Tony Emerton of artist-group Ddart and

individual performance artists Dave Stephens, Roger Ely, Dave Hill, and Claire Watson.⁴

Most of these people did not start out this way, however, and began performing as members of a long-defunct, now largely forgotten, student performance group: the unruly, large-scale collective Soft Soap. The group achieved a degree of recognition somewhat unusual for a student initiative at the time, touring and performing at venues and festivals across the country including across West Yorkshire, at the Oval House, London and the Birmingham International Performance Festival. Soft Soap gave birth to multiple smaller groups and individual practitioners once the group dissolved in 1974, after over two years of intense activity, ultimately proving it a generative association for many of its members. As Jeff Nuttall (1979a, 85-86) puts it: 'The word spread that something still new and unexplained was centred on West Yorkshire. In 1972-3 that small horde of students invaded the Fine art department at Leeds [...] most of whom, together with others who inclined eventually towards land art, community work, or straight theatre, passed in and out of the ranks of the Soft Soap performance group.' Nuttall was a key figure in shaping the peculiarities of the environment which made all this possible: he was employed as Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at the Polytechnic from 1970 to 1980.

In what follows, I seek to go beyond titillating tabloid representation in order to offer some understanding of both the genealogy and the pragmatics of art-teaching and art-making at Leeds between 1972 and 1975 (the period of study of Pilgrim and her peers), and why it proved to be so generative for those involved – despite the conservative nay-sayers. I build on the limited scholarly research on art education in the city in order to trace how idiosyncratic developments there in the seventies were dependent upon earlier forward-

⁴ Other early 1970s Leeds graduates, including poet George Szirtes and artists Rose English, Kevin Atherton and Ron Crowcroft continue to make vital contributions to visual, performing and literary arts in the twenty-first century.

reaching developments in the teaching of so-called Basic Research in the 1950s and 1960s, eventually mingling influences from the Bauhaus with elements of sixties counterculture. I draw upon newly-obtained oral histories from former students in order to reclaim Soft Soap from obscurity and piece together, as far as possible, how lecturers' outlooks were understood and navigated by those making performance work. This I do in order to delineate how performance practice was shaped by an art school pedagogy celebrating the creative possibilities of open-ended, cross-disciplinary creativity. Through recollections and analysis of sometimes literal, oftentimes metaphorical, 'walls' I offer an account of how performance-making briefly flourished within the art school through a practice of ignoring or traversing customary barriers between disciplines and those which divided staff from students, and students from each other. I will consider how the collectivist nature of Soft Soap productions sought to creatively maximise the nature of student cohorts made possible by the state funding of art college study whilst, at the same time, draw attention to the ways in which problems arose therein which undermined the success of such endeavours leading, ultimately, to the group's dissolution. I will end by reflecting on how the vitality of performance art at the Polytechnic began to decline in the wake of the break-up of Soft Soap, even as newly erected institutional walls intended to further facilitate its study were built.

From Basic Research to 'wide open liberty'

But first to track back: In the latter half of the 1950s, the pioneering teacher and painter Harry Thubron, along with his associate Tom Hudson at Leeds College of Art, developed an approach to art education known as Basic Research. Fundamentally exploratory, this bore similarities to, and a degree of connection with, the teachings of Basic Design elsewhere in the UK, including at Newcastle, Ipswich, Ealing, Leicester, Cardiff and Central School of Arts and Crafts in London (Thistlewood 1981, Bracewell 2007, Crippa & Williamson 2013,

Westley & Williamson 2015). It broadly perpetuated Bauhaus models of education which predated it by treating art-making as a heuristic process, through which students learnt by creating forms and ideas out of relatively unrestricted experiment with materials, rather than being 'trained' in the production of finished, and ultimately familiar, craft products and artistic styles. Although it was difficult to get information about the Bauhaus in Northern England in the fifties, scholars have noted that particular elements of Bauhaus teaching – such as Klee's *Pedagogical Sketchbook* – were picked up by Thubron and his associates as models for art teaching in Leeds (Forrest 1983, 190-194). The attention that Klee gave to a quasi-scientific, though in reality quite playful and poetic, exploration of the abstract qualities of line and form influenced Thubron's view of the modern artist as a formal and technical innovator analogous to the engineer and scientist. For him, the visual artist's role was to embrace an open-ended exploration of the expressive possibilities of visual form across an array of media, including traditional painting and sculptural materials such as paint, clay, wood and metal, but also newer materials and tools including plastics, photography and modern printing methods. The broad orientation was progressive and experimental, as Thubron told *The Guardian*: 'students are not trying to give you what they think you are wanting, art as she is known [...] The aim is to stop people doing 'art' and to make it difficult for them to give you what has already been done in art' (Parkin 1964, 8).

Key to all of this was Thubron's broadly anti-authoritarian approach to art teaching. Gone was the idea that students need slavishly reproduce the art of 'great' forbears (for example, by drawing mimetically from antique busts) or even that the master knew best. The 'god' of Basic Research, instead, was the creative process itself. Only by making intuitive decisions in the flow of art-making activity, responsive to the contingency of what was required by its peculiar and unrepeatable circumstances, could the artist fulfil his/her exploratory brief. All of this entailed, as Norbert Lynton (1992, 170) recalls of Thubron's time at Leeds, that

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3 '[b]arriers between departments were ignored. Even the barrier between faculty and students
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5 crumbled as intenser activity made for mutual regard. Teachers' and students' work alike
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7 became an urgent, priority business.' Hierarchies common to the master's workshop were
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9 rejected, as was the customary 'top-down,' uni-directional flow of knowledge and expertise
10
11 from teacher to student. In 1959 Thubron wrote: 'Basic training [...] is a balanced course
12
13 involving disciplines and freedoms that are relative to the individual [...] There are no
14
15 answers other than those offered by the student.' (Leeds College of Art 1959, 4). Indeed, as
16
17 Thubron often put it, the point of teaching, as far as he saw it, was to help artists to 'learn
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19 how to learn' for themselves (Askham & Thubron, 1967).
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26 As a result of the innovations of Basic Research at Leeds, the British abstract painter Patrick
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28 Heron (1971, 8) was able to write that the city's art school had become 'the most influential
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30 in Europe since the Bauhaus' - even after Thubron's departure from it in 1964. By the turn of
31
32 the decade, the city's College of Art had been incorporated into the newly founded, and
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34 multidisciplinary technical institution, Leeds Polytechnic. But, despite the fears of some, the
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36 broad experimental ethos of the Thubron years survived into Leeds pedagogy well into the
37
38 seventies. This was chiefly as a result of the appointment of Jeff Nuttall to its staff, who,
39
40 different in many ways to Thubron, brought a newly libertarian and provocative cast to it. As
41
42 poet, jazz trumpeter, painter, performance artist and author of *Bomb Culture* (1968) Nuttall
43
44 embodied the on-going polymathic reach of Leeds fine art. As writer and performer in
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46 performance group People Show, he was indebted to twentieth-century avant-gardism – to
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48 the Cabaret Voltaire and the poetics of Lautréamont and Artaud, as he was to 1960s-style
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50 events. Early People Show performances took the form of happenings which presented
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52 confounding 'aesthetic juxtapositions' (Nuttall 1979a, 17) of imagery and action, designed to
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54 arrest traditional theatrical priorities of character development, plot and the communication
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of a message. As a reading Nuttall's *Performance Art: Memoirs* makes abundantly clear, his interest in performance owed everything to such lineages of avant-garde art and almost nothing to theatrical traditions.

Nuttall had faith in the transformative power of aesthetics at a time when progressive politics, as far as he saw it, had become impotent - principally because the Sixties had failed to overthrow capitalism or stop the Vietnam war. He maintained a *soixante-huitard* opposition to the war into the 1970s, but by this time believed only art, not politics, to be antidote to it. For him, art's radicalism resided in its ready ability to besmirch the logics of capitalist rationality and moral judgement. When a journalist on BBC TV charged that the art of Leeds students was devoid of 'sanity,' Nuttall, appearing on the steps of the Polytechnic H Block, shot back: 'It has been claimed that the Vietnam war, which was much more expensive than the fine art department at Leeds, is a sane project. I think that is truly insane. Whereas I think the things we are doing here are sane' (The City Talking Music in Leeds 2017). In rejecting war, however, Nuttall was not rejecting violence. Like some latter-day Marinetti, he saw the job of the avant-garde artist to involve making new forms by means of an aggressive destruction of the old, in the process producing a 'violently intensified effect' (Nuttall 1979a, 43) to energise art's audiences. Performance art was seen by Nuttall as an aesthetic practice particularly attuned to such a task.

West Yorkshire had become a nationally and internationally-recognised regional hub for experimental performance by the early seventies (Secrest 1969, Henri 1974). Over in Bradford Albert Hunt had developed the Bradford Art College Theatre Group, which staged pedagogically-inspired productions in schools and in the streets, and used non-professional actors, usually students of visual rather than theatre arts. Meanwhile in Leeds, Nuttall's

predecessor Robin Page, along with George Brecht, had let loose a Fluxus sensibility within the studios of Leeds College of Art in the interregnum between Thubron and Nuttall. As Charnley (2015, 4-12) has shown, Page made performance art, sometimes collaborating with students in staging events in the city and elsewhere, and was largely responsible for establishing Leeds' reputation in exploring the form in the first place. But with Page and Brecht gone, Charnley (2015, 146) remembers that Nuttall's presence 'more than any other thing defined the ethos of the Fine Art Department in the early 1970s.' Nuttall was joined at the Polytechnic by further staff members whose interests variously turned around the making of performance: John Fox, founder of Burnley-based alternative street theatre group Welfare State International; John Darling, member of the Halifax-based performance art outfit, John Bull Puncture Repair Kit; and Roland Miller, performance artist and one-time performer with People Show. Members of this diffuse regional scene knew each other well and were often seen performing in each other's productions, along with Shirley Cameron and Rose McGuire. Excepting Hunt, who favoured more didactic works (Nuttall 1979, 72), most shared an interest in bringing avant-garde art, especially Dada-esque absurdities, to the street and to spaces of popular ritual (to processional festivities, agricultural shows, tea parties, etc.) in order to impact non-specialist audiences - passers-by unaware, or unprepared, for encountering 'art' in their path.

'The policy' securing Leeds continuing reputation as home to the avant-garde, writes Nuttall (2001, 64-65), 'was wide open liberty with all facilities of space, materials and machinery available to all students whose imagination was permitted to extend its range to film, performance, writing and tape composition, beyond the usual painting and sculpture. All you needed to be, at Leeds in the Seventies, was diverse. All that was forbidden was dull. The course was a kind of concert platform where sooner or later you had to do your turn.' In more

official language, as evidenced in the Quinquennial Review document for BA (Hons) Fine Art in 1976, prepared for inspection by the Council for National Academic Awards, the preferred term for such a pedagogic approach was 'intermedia': '[O]ur belief that the development of a creative personality in each student can best be achieved by not necessarily linking his [sic] progress to specific media at any point in the course, has been strengthened over the past five years [...] the inter-media approach has developed empirically and has grown increasingly relevant to student needs since the establishment of the Dip AD' (Leeds Polytechnic 1976, 2). In the spirit of such an ethos of artistic creation, John Darling was appointed to the Polytechnic in 1971 with the brief of setting up a small sound studio comprising tape recorders, amplifiers, speakers, mixers, microphones, Tandberg reel-to-reel tape-decks, a reverberation unit, a turntable and 'a whole bunch of sound effects records' (Dave Ball personal communication July 16 2015). Its purpose was to facilitate the making of soundscapes for use in so-called inter-media art.

'The 1972 intake of students,' however, Nuttall (Leeds Polytechnic 1976, 89) has attested, 'had an unusually large number amongst them who had come to Leeds expressly for performance.' This necessitated the provision of additional resources to meet their needs, so Polytechnic staff met a number of times as the 'Theatre Working Party' in late 1972 and early 1973 - including Nuttall, Fox, and Darling, but also staff members from Film and Three Dimensional Design - to discuss the needs of students engaged in performance.⁵ They resolved that 'premises be found immediately for rehearsal and performance space to accommodate that growing number of students who are concerned with performance in all parts of the Faculty in Art and Design,' and that 'the projected mezzanine floor to be built at

⁵ Additional staff members of the theatre working party included: John Oxlee, Russell Platt, Henry Giles, Derek Hyatt, Denise Mockler, Bill Mayson, Derek Carpenter, Val Gaudsen, and Adrian Yorke.

the end of the Main Fine Art Studio' (Leeds Polytechnic 1973) be completed in time for end of year events of 1973 – a projected timescale that, as we shall see, turned out to be much too ambitious in reality. Significant here, however, is the emphasis on performance being a 'service rather than a course' (Leeds Polytechnic 1973). This indicates to me that, not only were staff members conscious of needing to address the requirements of students *already* making performance on existing courses (such as on BA Fine Art) but also that performance be viewed as a practice readily given to straddling course structures, working across areas of specialisation, traversing art and design, and even including Contemporary Studies.⁶ Performance could equally be a mode of expression, or way of working, for students on different courses. Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, it was a practice which necessitated the building of new institutional walls (the 'performance' space) at the same time as predisposing its makers to work across existing structures as if they simply weren't impediments in the first place.

Soft Soap: Beyond Division

On her very first day as a student at Leeds Polytechnic in the autumn of 1972, Pilgrim recalls (personal communication 26 March 2013) an encounter with John Darling:

John was in his sound studio, and said, "Hello, first day?" I said "Yes." And he said, "Do you like theatre?" And I went, "Yes I love it." And he said, "You like art?" "Yes," I replied.

"And I suppose you think you can't do both?" And I went, "Yes, I've made the decision I

⁶ Playwright David Edgar was Yorkshire Arts Association Fellow in Creative Writing at Leeds Polytechnic in 1973, attached to the Department of Contemporary Studies. This connection to theatrical models of performance, and theatre professionals, echoed the role of Bradford Art College's Complementary Studies programme in developing the work of the Theatre Group under the leadership of Albert Hunt.

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3 want to do art.” And then he said, “Well you've come to the right place.” “What do you
4 mean?” I replied. “We do *both* here, and we call it performance art,” he said. I'd never heard
5 those words before. I just looked at him. “Go away and read this book,” he said, and gave me
6 a copy of *On the Art of Theatre* by Edward Gordon Craig. That book changed my life.
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14 Pilgrim was from a family with a history in the theatre business and had been vacillating
15 between her interest in making theatre and her passion for fine art before attending Leeds
16 Polytechnic. Through this exchange with her new tutor it was indicated that the compulsion
17 to choose between art *or* theatre, one which had so far beset Pilgrim's teenage years, was a
18 habit of conventional thinking that had no place in the libertarian space of the Leeds studios.
19 Pilgrim recalls that Leeds, on the contrary, was a place that encouraged students to
20 undertake exploratory work *regardless* of disciplinary proprieties. The idea of ‘intermedia’
21 was alive and well in Darling's approach to this way of thinking ‘performance art’ which, as
22 another relatively novel term, sought to name the hybrid space of artistic activity that he and
23 his peers were then exploring. Pilgrim soon appreciated that a novel way of working was
24 being called for: as Gordon Craig (1968, 44) polemicised, one which disregarded the
25 traditional divisions of labour in the theatre – between ‘actor, manager, designer and
26 producer’ and, as Leeds staff encouraged, one which embraced the hitherto separated-out
27 practices of the visual arts on the one hand, and the performing arts on the other.
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49 ‘We discovered that we were being encouraged to do whatever we wanted to do. [...] It was
50 an experiment,’ Pilgrim reflects (personal communication 26 March 2013). Michael Bennett,
51 a fellow student, described it thusly: ‘It was as if they'd taken all the walls away,
52 metaphorically speaking. It was a space for you to experiment and go off in your own
53 direction. There were no barriers’ (personal communication 13 November 2017). Indeed,
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where there *were* literal walls, stairs afforded students the perspective of literally seeing *over* them, as with the white boards demarcating individual studio spaces in the Polytechnic's H Block studio space. [Fig. 1] Another student, Robert Joyce, remembers the challenge and rationale of Leeds pedagogy slightly differently: 'It was like being thrown in at the deep end. It was quite difficult to get focused [...] In fact I think the teachers were there to sort of stop you being taught, if that makes sense. *They ring-fenced you, they were trying to ring-fence your creativity, or some such idea.* And not actually put ideas into your head. [...] I think they wanted you to teach yourself, involve yourself in finding things out' [my italics] (personal communication 29 September 2017). In this way, the only walls (or fences) erected by tutors, Joyce suggests, were those built to shield students *from* tutorial intervention, from the presumptively ruinous imposition of the teacher's authority upon student's otherwise ideally independent and autonomous creative activity. Only this border was necessary to maintain the sanctity of the Thubron-esque importance of student's self-directed learning. All other divides were there to be transgressed: especially those between disciplines, and the ones separating out individuals each from the other.

Enthused by such a permissive educational environment, Pilgrim and her peers set to work: 'A group of us, which was Ray Richards, Janet Godard, Dave Hill, and Ron Dewhirst, and a couple of other people started to want to work together. And then it grew' (personal communication 26 March 2013). What they grew into was Soft Soap, a large scale, amorphous collective, self-described in later publicity material as 'an interesting and imaginative flux of performing artists from all over the country specialising in performance, idiocy, sculpture, films, kid's stuff, poetry [...] sounds, etc..' (Dewhirst 1974). It was extremely wide-ranging as art and equally broad church as theatre, so much so that it irreverently resisted serious-minded attempts to constrain it through categorisation.

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3 According to their hyperbolic, spoofy self-definition, Soft Soap were purveyors of
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5 ‘experimental theatre, molecular theatre, fringe theatre, eyebrow theatre, lowbrow theatre
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7 [...] theatre of chance, theatre of certainty, theatre of music, theatre of ringing bells and
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9 drums, theatre of the scrapheap, lipstick theatre, horse chestnut theatre, cramped theatre,
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11 flowing theatre, theatre of the floating dazonka’ (Dewhirst 1974). If Soft Soap activities were
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13 conceivable across a horizontally dispersed, almost impossibly open field like this, so too its
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15 membership: sprawling to a large, ungainly collection of egos and ideas, additionally
16
17 incorporating from the class of 1972: Kim Beesley, Michael Bennett (photographer), Dennis
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19 De Groot, Pete Dent, John Dubowski, Tony Emerton, Colin Gray, Jon Latham, Chris
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21 Lawton, Dave Lewis, Judy Newton, Dave Stephens, Diana Wood and, later, additional
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23 members from the class of ’73: Sara Nuttall (daughter of Jeff Nuttall), Robert Joyce, Clare
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25 Watson, and John Williams – in fact, making up twenty three people in total over the course
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27 of the group’s existence between 1972 and 1974.
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35 In Leeds, Soft Soap actions were undertaken in the street, as well as in the Polytechnic
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37 Gallery and the institution’s Common Room. In the beginning their productions were ‘like a
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39 mixed-up cabaret show,’ says Raym Richards, ‘where people would do different things
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41 within a timeline, say between 7pm and 11pm, in some context like the student union’
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43 (personal communication 13 February 2018). But as the group developed its craft, the
44
45 structure of its live work shifted to resemble less a series of successive turns and more a
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47 simultaneous, or at least choreographed, presentation of multiple elements. As Dave Stephens
48
49 recalls it, ‘the structure of all these performances tended to be that we worked in pairs’ but as
50
51 a kind of ‘giant college working at odds with one another’ (personal communication 26 July
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53 2019). The unifying element of a Soft Soap performance was not theatrical – there was no
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55 play text nor script – but instead an agreed theme or action that would be improvised, in
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3 differing ways, by members of the group. This could be, for example, a particular song, or
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5 image or set of images. Additionally, the work of Soft Soap would coalesce through the
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7 textures of particular materials installed or used in the performance space, or colours worn or
8
9 painted onto objects, thereby achieving a level of sculptural or visual, rather than narrative,
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11 coherence - as with the role played by colour in Shirley Cameron and Roland Miller's *The*
12
13 *Cyclamen Cyclists* (1971). Some of these elements are evident in photographic
14
15 documentation of a Soft Soap performance which took place on the 17th May 1974 in the
16
17 Polytechnic Common Room. In Fig. 2 we can see De Groot, blindfolded with a stick, and
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19 dressed in a burnt and ragged tuxedo, his arms covered in white flour - the material in which
20
21 he has been giving his partner, Richards, 'a bath' (De Groot, personal communication 30 July
22
23 2019). Around him, redolent of a circus ring, is arranged what looks like straw or wood
24
25 shavings which echoes the colour and the, somewhat different, textures of the raw sheep's
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27 wool folded around the wrists of Stephens and Latham, and the bandages wrapped around the
28
29 body of Pilgrim. [Figs. 3 and 4]
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38 There is perhaps some thematic element at work here too: in the presentation of symbiotic
39
40 pairs. De Groot and Richards are both constrained, albeit in different ways (De Groot
41
42 blindfolded, Richards strapped down, immobile) and Stephens and Latham are attached to
43
44 one another through an elaborate, custom-built pulley system, making one performer's
45
46 movement 'master' to the others' 'puppet' actions. Both pairs thematise the reliance of the
47
48 one upon the other. De Groot needs Richards to see, Richards relies upon De Groot to move,
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50 whilst Stephens and Latham's movements cause the opposite movement in the attached
51
52 partner (but who is in control?). Pilgrim, somewhat inexplicably, performs 'a lighthouse'
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54 (goggles and plastic seagull on head) and, with her hand-held torch acting as its sweeping
55
56 beam, sings *I Do Like to be Beside the Seaside*. The whole piece betrays not only the
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intermedia ethos of performance-making encouraged at Leeds, perhaps with an added echo of Beckettian fatalism, but also a latter-day surrealist concern with estranging images of everyday life, particularly evident in Pilgrim's performed image.⁷

The Polytechnic was well financed to support the making of such performances. Materially, it provided technical expertise and machinery across many different 'service' areas - ceramics, performance, film, etching, fine prints, plastics, textiles, woodwork, metalwork, sound, and photography – which enabled the practical realisation of Soft Soap's diverse output which, in addition to costumes, could often involve construction of wooden structures, dry-stone walls and installation-type or other performance accoutrements. Richards (personal communication 13 February 2018) fondly recalls the largesse of the state-funded provision of those years: 'I said I've got this idea [...] and the college actually had money for you to make it. So not only did we get a grant, there was a pool of money we could access to hire a Rolls Royce, or a hot air balloon or whatever.' Pilgrim goes on: 'We were also given money to create our own performance company,' to turn Soft Soap into a professional travelling unit, replete with its own vehicle, wardrobe, and props (personal communication 26 March 2013).

But perhaps the resource the Polytechnic provided above all was the human one of students each to the other. Richards remembers: 'What Leeds was very good at was picking potential. That's what I saw there. [...] They selected that year [1972 entry] carefully. The dynamic creativity and collaborative nature of that year was very much to do with the personalities the tutors had selected at that time. [...] I think what they looked for was a feel of creativity in that year' (personal communication 13 February 2018). An important element of this cohort-

⁷ Other Polytechnic staff, like Tony Earnshaw and Patrick Hughes, were also indebted to surrealism making Leeds, at least for a time, a Northern English enclave for the poetics of estrangement.

creation involved bringing individuals together across lines of social class: Richards, the third child from a single-parent family in Wallasey, Merseyside, for example, pitched alongside Pilgrim from a middle-class southern English background. Richards had not achieved the required grades for entry to Leeds but was nevertheless given a place as an exception to the normal admissions rules, as a candidate of outstanding artistic promise. This ability of 'advanced' programmes of study in Fine Art to suspend normal entry requirements had been part of the new regime in British art education implemented in the wake of the first Coldstream report in 1960.⁸ It made it possible into the 1970s and 1980s for Richards, and others like him without either the educational or the economic capital, to go to art college and, ultimately, to make something like Soft Soap (and subsequently Ddart) possible.

Nuttall (2001, 65) has reflected: 'What was frequently daunting to students from the south was the predominance of working-class kids from northern industrial cities, the so-called woollybacks, with more interest in Tetley's bitter than in clothes and transcendental drugs.' Nuttall is referring to students from Lancashire or Merseyside in his use of the derogatory term 'woollybacks' here (he may even be thinking of Richards), and there is more than a whiff of Northern masculine stereotyping in his recollection. Even so, Nuttall highlights that novel experiences of cross-class exchange were fundamental to the nature of the learning environment in Fine Art at Leeds – perhaps as important as its open-ended inter-media ethos. This underlines the importance of working-class participation in the arts more broadly in this period which, as Claire MacDonald (2012, 149) has powerfully argued, was responsible for

⁸ Following the recommendations of the first Coldstream Report the largely craft-based National Diploma in Design (NDD) was superseded by the more liberal arts approach of the Diploma in Art and Design (Dip. AD). With the latter, the study of art was treated as comparable to other university degree subjects and required a sudden step-up in terms of academic entry requirements - to five 'O' level passes or the equivalent mixture of 'O' and 'A' levels. For more on this see Strand (1987, 8-14).

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3 ‘creating new directions for interdisciplinary art, [and] also of breaking down stifling
4 boundaries of class and tradition at the heart of British culture’ in the 1960s and 1970s.
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6 Members of performance group Ddart, for example, who emerged out of Soft Soap, shared
7 similar economic and cultural backgrounds: alongside Richards’ Merseyside upbringing, De
8 Groot and Lewis both came from homes on council estates, and Emerton came from a lower
9 middle-class background in West Drayton. As a result, all were, as Richards remembers it,
10 against the elitism of art and were in sympathy with the idea that you didn’t ‘need an arts
11 education to appreciate what we do’ (personal communication 13 February 2018). On at least
12 one occasion, it seems the working-class proclivity for drinking that Nuttall identifies above
13 was taken as a starting point, even a resource, for the making of a piece of performance art. In
14 1974, in an early incarnation of Ddart, which additionally included Pilgrim, five performers
15 drank themselves sick in a purpose built ‘cage’ in the Polytechnic Gallery. [Fig. 5] ‘We all
16 just went in there and got pissed,’ De Groot recalls (personal communication 22 February
17 2018), ‘We just drank. We thought everybody would just walk in and out, and it would be
18 something that people could dip in and out of. But we ended up with this huge audience, and
19 it went on for four of five hours, which was ruinous. A few of us were violently sick.’
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42 Analogously, Pilgrim and Goddard, often paired within Soft Soap productions, drew on their
43 cultural capital as young white English women. They worked with imagery culled from their
44 middle- and upper-middle class female childhoods, and experiences of traditional English
45 customs, to produce what would later become their evocative, self-named ‘theatre of
46 gentility’ (Henri 1979, 8). Their backgrounds allowed them to mine the resonances of
47 estrangement and anxiety in polite society, poetically suggesting such affects within carefully
48 staged theatrical tableau or estranged happenings in the street – often involving uncanny
49 theatrical appearances of bee keepers, cleaners, or ladies-in-waiting. [Fig. 6] This was already
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evident in Pilgrim's final year degree show work, *Occasional Tables*, in which a restaurant space was thrillingly evoked through the use of sound (courtesy of Darling and the sound studio). '[T]ea cups rattle, a string quartet plays,' writes the poet, and then external examiner of the Leeds course, Adrian Henri (1979, 8). 'A well-dressed young woman (Pilgrim) is shown to her seat,' before playing out 'an unstated monologue of waiting, betrayal.' A 'convulsive moment,' however, breaks the tranquil reverie when 'a tea tray full of cutlery drops deafeningly from the ceiling.' The clatter arresting, threatening even.

My point here is that the accumulated cultural capital which students brought with them from their differing familial contexts became raw material for performance-making in the permissive art studio. Such cultural knowledge and experience was brought therein as material to be worked on, much as a sculptor might work with the malleability and plasticity of clay. Leeds performance artists plied the forms of English social ritual, and the bombastic or petty values which often underpinned them, reshaping or distorting them, and rendering them ugly, ridiculous, or unfathomable in the process.

But if the 'level playing field' of art school access during this period allowed for novel experiences of class-mixing within collective artistic endeavours like Soft Soap, working together in such ways also proved challenging. Working as a group often led to disagreements, particularly so because of the large-scale of the collective and the number of egos involved in it. 'It was like herding cats,' recalls Richards, 'and what became apparent to me is that the people who had more experience in meetings got to control them. A lot of us were very naïve, we'd say our thing, but the clever ones would wait until the end, when everyone was exhausted, and go, 'Why don't we do this?' (personal communication 13 February 2018). The real problem occurred, however, as the reaching of an agreement

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3 became ever more elusive. Bennett: ‘There were rivalries, and jealousies. I think the
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5 difficulty of doing those large events, just destroyed it. There was no central command, no
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7 leader. It was a group with as many leaders as members. And I think the essential anarchic
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9 nature of it was impossible to sustain long term’ (personal communication 13 November
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11 2017).
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17 At the Birmingham International Performance Festival in 1974 the group had been contracted
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19 by the organisers to perform in front of the Repertory Theatre but, because nobody could
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21 think what to do, or couldn’t agree, they ended up playing the tag game British Bulldog on
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23 the grass outside. Though on one level representing or spoofing competitive Britishness, the
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25 game was played aggressively according to those that remember it, as if giving violent outlet
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27 for the bad feeling and disagreements that had arisen amongst group members, and ultimately
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29 led to feelings of unhappiness with Soft Soap’s direction of travel. Soon after, DeGroot
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31 recalls: ‘We ended up going on a canal trip, which was the death knell of things, because we
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33 all just argued. But instead of arguing for a couple of hours, we argued for weeks. I
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35 remember thinking it was just a big inevitability: everyone’s egos and creative drives’
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37 (personal communication 22 February 2018). Stephens agrees, concluding flatly: ‘I think
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39 there were just too many people in it sometimes’ to allow it to survive for very long (personal
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41 communication 21 November 2016).
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49 **Degrees of Decline**

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54 Ron Crowcroft, a fine art student who started at the Polytechnic in 1973, remarks upon the
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56 winding down of this period of frenetic performance art activity at Leeds: ‘When I was a first
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58 year we would see the performance artists, Ray Richards and company, doing stuff all the
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time and going crazy, travelling the world or living in upturned boats, like Clare [Watson] did. It was all going on. But there was nothing like that in the following two years [...] It felt like the government was getting into it too, like “OK, how many people get jobs after they leave?” There were standards starting to come in. They [the Polytechnic] had to prove their worth as an art school. [...] The following two years were milder’ (personal communication 9 February 2018). These years were also the first to study for the new BA (Hons) qualification, rather than the previously existing Dip. AD. The introduction of the BA qualification brought new worries to the defenders of a 1960s-style UK art education: ‘The old Dip. AD was at least unique and gave some indication of the holder’s creative aspirations as an artist,’ bemoaned Leeds Polytechnic lecturer Ken Rowat (1976) in the pages of *The Guardian*. But the ‘dreadful BA accolade,’ and its accompanying changes, threatened the autonomy of both institutional pedagogy and student creativity – at least according to Rowat. ‘There are already signs [writing in 1976] that some art departments are pathetically moving towards imitation of the academic conventions of the universities, having failed to understand the difference between the artist and the scholar. There is talk of “tighter course structures,” “raising standards,” [...] emphasising the art history content of the course.’ Alongside such things Rowat feared that issuing a BA qualification would lead, most egregiously, to ‘an increasing emphasis on A levels as an entry qualification.’ The apparent danger posed by such a development turned around the question of access, threatening to preclude creatively-minded students without academic results from admission to art school, and thereby eradicating the (open-)grounds of the culture that had brought us the Sixties – and groups like Soft Soap - in the first place.

Looking back from the vantage point of 2018, De Groot concurs that his time at Leeds, and that of his peers, was some kind of high- or end-point: ‘It felt like there was this endless

potential to take art out from the stuffy gallery situation and liberate it. I think in some ways we were on the tail end of a kind of perception of art as something that could re-form the way people thought and behaved. That was my great luck in life: arriving at that time, in its last throws, before it all got spent' (personal communication 22 February 2018). This sense of a final 'hurrah' for a sixties-style avant-garde, which left it libidinally, even financially, 'spent' by the mid-1970s was shared by other Polytechnic tutors of the day. In addition to Rowat, it was also clear to Nuttall (1979a, 89) that, after the students who made up Soft Soap graduated in 1975, the unsettling energies of performance art they had unleashed went with them, principally to London. 'The spotlight has moved,' he wrote reflectively, 'The energy level subsided.' Going even further than this, he charged the period of performance art activity in Leeds as *already* marking a decline from the height of the form's powers in the 1960s. Performance was once 'a programme for restoring the public life-appetite by challenging or destroying expectations,' he wrote, but its ability to do this was 'degrading' even as Soft Soap, Ddart, and Hesitate and Demonstrate were beginning to come together (Nuttall 1979b).⁹

This was all highly ironic for the Polytechnic. By 1975 its purpose-built performance space – initially dreamt up in order to provide a working space for Soft Soap – was completed. But, as Nuttall noted (Leeds Polytechnic 1976, 89), in the autumn of 1975, with the Soft Soap team gone, there was 'an anti-climactic vacuum.' With fewer students interested in performance in subsequent student year groups, alongside such a newly available resource, it seems the institutional pace of change had been too slow to accommodate performance art whilst it blossomed, only succeeding in providing custom-made resources for it once it had

⁹ Nuttall's claims about the winding down of performance art's vitality beyond Leeds Polytechnic should be taken with a pinch of salt, particularly as the form becomes expressly important for exploring identity politics into the 1980s and beyond.

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3 begun its decline as an activity within the student body.¹⁰ The purpose-built ‘walls’ were
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5 simply too late. It also meant that they, alongside sister resources like the sound studio, were
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7 freed up for purposes other than making audio for performance art, soon to include the
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9 creation of popular music in the wake of punk rock, the latter arriving in Leeds in December
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11 1976 in the shape of the *Anarchy in the UK* tour – which introduced the Sex Pistols and The
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13 Clash to the city’s youth, including those studying art. A new cohort of students would soon
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15 take the remnants of the Leeds art experiment and its avant-garde precepts in a different
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17 direction again, this time knocking down walls to get from the artist’s studio to the record
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19 buying public - in this case as members of rock and pop bands appearing on hit parade TV
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21 programmes like *Top of the Pops* in the UK and *American Bandstand* in the US. But that is
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23 another story.
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55 ¹⁰ Nuttall notes (Leeds Polytechnic 1976, 89): ‘Now there are seven people in the third year,
56 more in the second year, and a possible seven people in the first year who are performance
57 oriented. The predominant direction is post-Cage in its preoccupation with accident and
58 mathematical repeat procedures.’ These figures may well be inflated by Nuttall, as they do
59 not seem to concur with student memory about the low level of performance art activity
60 during these years.

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Leeds Polytechnic H Block Fine Art Studio c. 1972. Photo: Michael Bennett

1779x1173mm (72 x 72 DPI)

Fig 2 Dennis De Groot (John Latham in background), Soft Soap performance, Leeds Polytechnic Common Room, 17 May 1974. Photo: Michael Bennett

1191x1789mm (72 x 72 DPI)

Fig 3 Dave Stephens, Soft Soap performance, Leeds Polytechnic Common Room, 17 May 1974. Photo: Michael Bennett

1809x1201mm (72 x 72 DPI)

Fig 4 Gerry Pilgrim (John Latham in background), Soft Soap performance, Leeds Polytechnic Common Room, 17 May 1974. Photo: Michael Bennett

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Fig. 5 Ddart, *Animal Magic*, 1974. Dave Lewis, Tony Emerton, Ray Richards (in dress). Leeds Polytechnic Gallery. Photo: Michael Bennett

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Fig. 6 Hesitate and Demonstrate performance, Nottingham, 1975. Gerry Pilgrim and Janet Goddard. Photo: Michael Bennett

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