

THE LIFE AND WORKS JEFF NUTTALL

All the following text was written and produced by Gillian Whiteley as part of her research and curatorial work commissioned for the exhibition *Jeff Nuttall, Life and Works: 1933-2004* at Mid-Pennine Arts gallery at Burnley in 2005. This and other material is no longer on the www.jeff-nuttall.co.uk website but is archived at this [link](#)

Timeline

Born 8th July **1933**, Clitheroe, Lancashire.

Nuttall family moves to rural Orcop, near Herefordshire's Welsh border, where
as village school

1949-51 Studies art at Hereford School of Art.

1951-53 Studies art at Bath Academy, Corsham, under William Scott, Peter Kenneth Armitage.

1953-54 Teacher-training at Institute of Education, London.

1956 -1968 Teaches art at secondary schools in Leominster, London, Hertfordshire. Also teaches for the Workers Education Association. Develops interest in jazz and improvisation.

Late 1950s Active in *Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament*, creative output related to peace movement.

1960s Makes assemblages from found objects and soft materials, some 'happenings', involved in a wide range of collaborative creative projects including readings and performances.

1964-7 Co-edits *My Own Mag* with William Burroughs. Contributes poetry to 'underground' magazines such as *International Times* and *The Moving Times*, edited by Peter Dinklage. Publishes alongside American 'Beat' writers in international literary journals such as *Journal*.

1966 Contributes to the *sTigma* – with Dave Trace, Islwyn Watkins, John Lat Tomazos – an environment built in the basement of *Better Books*, Charing Cross Road. Broadcasts a feature on *sTigma*.

1966 Founds the *People Show*, an experimental theatre group, initially with Marlborough Gilchrist and John (Dod) Darling, later joined by Roland Miller, Shirley Cameron and others. Writes the early scripts and takes part as a performer intermittently into the early 1970s. Reunites them again in 1987/8.

1968 Publishes *Bomb Culture*, an autobiographical account and critical analysis of the development of Sixties' 'counter-culture', an immediate best-seller, translated into French and mentioned in the Houses of Parliament.

1968-70 Lecturer at Bradford College of Art. Settles in Wyke.

1969 Fulcrum publishes his novel, *Pig*, with preface by William Burroughs.

1970-81 Senior Lecturer, Leeds Polytechnic where he promotes experimental int and becomes well-known for generating spontaneous events and outrageous across the city. Lives in Todmorden from late 1970s.

1970s Makes erotic etchings, collages, continues to write poetry and fiction an range of performance groups.

1972-75 Writes and performs with *Jack* (with Rose McGuire).

1975 Chairman of National Society of Poetry. Calder and Boyars publish his nov

1978-81 Poetry critic for *The Guardian*. Continues writing book reviews for new the 1990s.

1981-1984 Head of Fine Art, Liverpool Polytechnic. Takes early retirement and fi work and a range of literary projects.

1982-83 Residencies at Deakin University, Geelong, Australia produce etching soft cushions.

Late 1970s/early 1980s Creates a range of grotesque and cartoon-like ceram

1984-85 Major return to painting, works on two series of large paintings of Pei at Angela Flowers Gallery, London.

1985-86 Co-edits *Knuckleduster Funnies* with Robert Bank.

1986-87 Moves to the Algarve, produces a series of large paintings inspired by Mediterranean light.

1987 Returns to London and Nelson, Lancashire and finally settles in South Wales. Develops work in TV and film and takes on many cameo roles. Continues writing and cultural criticism for various journals and newspapers.

1990s Works on the Black Mountains reliefs and develops a series of soft sculpture from wall to floor. Makes many landscape studies in watercolour, gouache.

2001 Calder publishes *Art and the Degradation of Awareness*, a critical evaluation – a characteristic combination of semi-autobiographical dramatic script, polemic on his earlier *The Pleasures of Necessity*, published by Arrowspire Press in 1988.

Dies 4th January **2004**, Abergavenny, South Wales.

Gillian Whiteley

Biography

Jeff Nuttall was a prolific artist and poet but he was also a jazz musician, critic, social commentator, theatrical innovator and influential teacher. In an obituary, the poet Michael Horovitz fittingly described him as 'a catalyst, perpetrator and champion of rebellion and experiment in the arts and society'. Certainly, Nuttall worked at the margins, creating artworks, performances and writings which challenged moral and political orthodoxies and continually tested the boundaries of social acceptability and public taste. Whilst Nuttall's creative output – in all its forms – relentlessly confronted authoritarianism, it fundamentally celebrated the nature of what it is to be human with a wonder and rawness which is sometimes comic, sometimes disturbing.

Born in Clitheroe, Nuttall spent his youth in Herefordshire's Welsh borders, but returned north to live in Lancashire and Yorkshire for a number of periods throughout his adult life. After leaving art college, his early work demonstrates a preoccupation with the human figure but his involvement in the late 1950s London jazz scene and the early activities of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament provided new subjects for exploration through writings and drawings.

Nuttall soon became a pivotal figure in Sixties' British 'counter-culture'. He played a key role within the international 'underground' press and literary scene, exchanging writings and ideas with fellow thinkers in the United States and Europe - such as William Burroughs, Carl Weissner, Alexander Trocchi, Bob Cobbing and Dom Sylvester Houedard - initiating small journals such as the anarchic cut-up *My Own Mag*

or collaborating on various publishing projects. Much of this is chronicled in *Bomb Culture*, his semi-autobiographical account published in 1968.

In the Sixties, Nuttall also started working with found objects and soft materials – often using stockings and kapok – to create a series of assemblages which resembled dishevelled or distorted human body parts. Sometimes, these objects would be left in luggage lockers to be discovered later at random. Occasionally, they formed part of a performance, environment or "happening", an informal, often spontaneous, transient multi-media event which usually involved audience participation. His contribution to the early development of happenings in Britain was particularly important through collaborations and connections with a coterie of artists involved with Group H, the Drury Lane Arts Lab and sTigma.

Happenings merged into the burgeoning field of 'performance art' when, in 1966, Nuttall founded the People Show, an eclectic group of artists and performers which took their live acts and improvisational interventions onto the streets, into telephone boxes and public toilets. Since then, attracting a diverse range of artists, musicians and practitioners, the People Show has maintained Nuttall's legacy with its commitment to the production of experimental multi-disciplinary performances.

In the 1980s, with spells in Australia, Portugal, London, Lancashire and then shifting to the rural borders of Wales, Nuttall returned to painting – producing a series of expressionistic landscapes and reliefs which marry the eroticism of his earlier drawings with a heightened awareness of the fecundity of nature.

From the 1960s through to the mid-1980s, Nuttall was an inspirational teacher, first at Leeds Polytechnic and then as Head of Fine Arts at Liverpool Polytechnic, promoting experimental approaches and crossing creative boundaries. Alongside his teaching, Nuttall steadily acquired a reputation as a significant poet of his generation, publishing collections of his own work and regularly contributing to various literary journals such as *Ambit*. Throughout his life, Nuttall was a compelling critical commentator on contemporary and popular culture. His writings demonstrate a postmodern sensibility – he saw no paradox in bringing together the ideas of the French essayist and philosopher Georges Bataille and the Blackpool comedian Frank Randle. Above all, Nuttall remained passionate about the emancipatory role of the arts in creating a more humane and open society and he expressed this many times and in many places. By the time of his death in 2004, Nuttall had published an extensive body of work including novels, graphic novelettes, poetry, biographies, critical writings on popular culture and adult comics, many of which are now documented and shown on this website.

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Counter-culture

Like many of his generation, Nuttall's teenage years were shaped by an increasing dismay at the older generation's tolerance of the bombings of Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the nuclear build-up of the Cold War. Dismay turned to anger and, whilst teaching in secondary schools in the 1950s, he became involved in early protest movement activities, marching up to Aldermaston with the newly formed Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. After meeting Bob Cobbing, a sound-smith in the 'concrete poetry' movement and later manager of Better Books, Nuttall became a leading figure on the London 'underground' scene, performing poetry in public

parks, planning and organising events and bringing together artists, poets and like-minded subversive thinkers, producing a number of small journals and pamphlets.

Better Books, along with other 'alternative' bookshops, clubs and galleries, became the hub of London's 'underground', hosting events such as early 'happenings', including the notorious **sTigma** environment – a labyrinthine, nausea-inducing installation which included violent and sexually depraved imagery and an overpowering concern with the abject. A high point of underground activity was Allen Ginsberg's appearance at the Albert Hall event in 1965, a four-hour International Poetry Incantation organised by Michael Horovitz and others, at which Nuttall and John Latham planned a 'happening' and Bruce Lacey's robotic assemblages took the stage.

Nuttall's connections with the American 'Beat' writers were important. Between 1964 and 1967, Nuttall co-edited a cut-up magazine with William Burroughs, **My Own Mag**. He was associate editor of **Moving Times** and regularly did cartoons for **International Times**. His role at the heart of the international counter-cultural scene is evident from his prolific correspondence with various figures in the mid-Sixties, some of which is exhibited here. Perhaps his most important contribution though is **Bomb Culture**, a semi-auto-biographical account of the times. Written in 1967, a year of mounting protest against the Vietnam War, it was published in 1968 at a moment when a whole group of people shared the idea of 'cultural warfare'. As Nuttall commented in 1984, 'they did open the prisons and burn the stock exchange and it really did look as though this was it, this was spontaneous revolution'. In 1975, his novel **Snipe's Spinster** looked back over the ground and at the 'failure' of the revolution and a number of Nuttall's later writings deal in one way or another with the aftermath of 1968 and the conviction that a common human consciousness can only be achieved through creating a way of thinking that is not founded on a relentless commodification of experience.

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Quotes



'On the march you got pacifists, you got Quakers in large numbers, conscientious objectors, mostly from the middle class. You got contingents of trade unions. And you had the beatniks who suddenly emerged – and nobody had known about them outside their favourite haunts - Soho coffee bars and jazz clubs. And they appeared in the standard uniform of the time which was tattered jeans and dirty old donkey jackets. Everyone wore black. Really filthy: the tidemark around the neck was a badge of authenticity...'

Dadaists, absurdists, surrealists had always believed that by striking an alternative aesthetic... you could change the face of society.... What happened with the 'Beats' was that by merging this transformation of standards and aesthetic pleasure with actual attack on political structures you effect a sort of non-specific revolution,

which was not programmed, which was not dictated...You'd scrapped the old rules and, now, hopefully, a new set of rules would evolve from a way of life that had been established according to human pleasure and generosity. It erupted, I would say, with Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Jeff Nuttall in Jonathan Green, *Days in the Life, Voices from the English Underground*, 1989.

October 1965. There is a special peculiar atmosphere to these Better Books functions, a sort of curious mixed atmosphere. Part Quaker, part Anarchist, part decadent. The crowd usually consists of idealistic figures in publishing, up and comings, amiable potheads, one or two celebrities, and a rash of kids of all three sexes.

There was a frisson for us all to savour as there had been at the first Aldermaston - and the Underground was suddenly on the surface, in open ground with a following of thousands... After the Albert Hall event I wrote to Klaus Lea crying: 'London is in flames. The spirit of William Blake walks on the water of the Thames, *sigma has exploded into a giant rose. Come and drink the dew.*' Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture*, 1968

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Happenings

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the **People Show** was frequently billed as 'the first underground theatre in England'. It grew out of Nuttall's move, in October 1966, to the Abbey Arts Centre in London where he recruited founder members Mark Long, Syd Palmer, Laura Gilbert and John (Dod) Darling. After doing a 'jazz happening' at Notting Hill Gate Festival, they did their first show in the basement at Better Books in Charing Cross Road. This became a regular fortnightly venue. When Better Books closed in 1967, the group was invited by Jim Haynes to be resident at the Drury Lane Arts Lab. For three years, Nuttall wrote scripts, occasionally directed and intermittently performed with the group which included various artists, musicians and performers, including Roland Miller, Shirley Cameron, Mike Figgis, and George Khan.

The dynamism of the **People Show** was rooted in the energy of its various members and thrived on a persistent but creative conflict about the group's artistic heritage and direction. Despite Nuttall's casual comments to the **International Times** in 1967, he was adamant that it was to be 'performance art' and not 'theatre'. He viewed it as one element in his general quest to find a new creative form, providing

another arena to explore the intensity of experience and confront complacency. Reflecting the influential writings and ideas of Antonin Artaud and John Cage, his aims were for immediacy, an 'intensity of effect'. Nuttall also wrote of his wish to work with 'simultaneity' and 'the dense polyphony of collective ensemble'. As with so many of Nuttall's creative endeavours, jazz provided the language and metaphor. The early shows, though tightly scripted, had Nuttall 'laying down' the tune and the performers improvised and added to it. Contemporary accounts reflected this too; referring to the figure of the enchained Nuttall writhing on the floor, a reviewer for The Canterbury Festival described the first **People Show** as 'a jam session for all the senses'.

For Nuttall, 'radical juxtaposition' provided a core methodology. He used a montage technique, collaging ideas and found images together. Additionally, the absurdist tradition – especially in the shape of Alfred Jarry's **Ubu Roi**, one of an anarchic series of dramas which influenced many artists and poets in the 1960s - was especially important for Nuttall. This partly led to his setting up the **New Fol de Rols** and then working with Rose McGuire in **Jack** in the mid-1970s, which led him to explore his fascination with absurdity, generating a series of scripts, lectures, 'telephone novels' and performances including '**Sunday Blood**'.

Gillian Whiteley

Quotes

'I paint poems, sing sculptures, draw novels. So I don't want a name for this latest excursion but you can call it theatre if you want...'

Jeff Nuttall, 'The People' in the **International Times**, No 9, 1967



'It was the People Show because that's how it started when we finally got into the Better Books basement – as an exhibition of people. We presented ourselves as sculptures. ...'

'The happening is the human being and his behaviour used as a found object; either as an aesthetic phenomenon... or as a startling juxtaposition... or as a fetish... It was developed between Cage, Rauschenberg and Kaprow, with Oldenberg and Dine not far behind. Joseph Beuys took it to Europe in the late Fifties. Jean-Jacques Lebel, Mark Boyle and Ken Dewey brought it to England in the early Sixties where Adrian Henri, myself, Bob Cobbing and others picked up on it...'

'I was particularly interested in the human being as an objet trouvé...I was not interested in the flash illusionism of the orthodox theatre... I was concerned to compose with behaviour, with objects and with space...'

'I was concerned to sew a subversive thread of imagination into the fabric of ordinary behaviour patterns...Also I was concerned with violently intensified effect.'

'It's one thing to watch a riot from a fifth floor building. It's another to find yourself caught up in it. I wanted to conduct exactly this sort of excitement, to involve the public in the riot, not give them a safe viewpoint. I was suffering deeply from a massive sense of moral and creative impotence... The anti-bomb movement had been ignored. The Vietnam war was permitted... Affect was nowhere to be found. I wanted to smash the impenetrable glass bulbs in which people housed their apathy.'

'The scripts then were pretty loaded.... emotionally as frank and dense as a poem or a good jazz solo... intended as mere hooks on which to hang the disparate vocabulary, visual, obtuse, abstract, absurd, of the happening...'

*Jeff Nuttall, **Performance Art**, Volume 1: Memoirs, 1979*

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Landscape

The final series of large landscape paintings might deceive us into thinking that we are witness merely to a nostalgic yearning for a lost place and past. This late work is more complex. Whilst there is certainly a neo-Romanticist element, these works spring from a heightened awareness of the exuberance and vitality of organic forms and processes. Nuttall himself referred to the paintings of the 1980s and 1990s as his 'Dionysian Landscapes'. Turbulent hedges spill out of the picture frame in an ebullient mess of growth and decay. The apparent rural idyll of Nuttall's youth – the 'golden' Orcop valley of the Welsh borders of Herefordshire – informs much of his later writings and artworks and is the specific subject of his poem, *Return Trip*.

The industrial North is also present in these later works. An unusual aspect of his Pennine series is the aerial viewpoint. *Todmorden* 1985, like a number of the others, looks down on the narrow post-industrial valleys dotted with dilapidated textile mills, railway arches, canals and viaducts.

The later Welsh landscapes and sculpted reliefs, with their riotous colours and bulging anthropomorphic forms, connect back to Nuttall's recurring theme of re-engaging with the immediacy of sense experience. These were made largely when Nuttall moved to Abergavenny and Crickhowell. They combine the hyper-realism of the nineteenth-century painter Samuel Palmer and a Blakeian sense of astonishment with an eye for the farcical and burlesque that was rooted in the anarchic sensibility of the Sixties.

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Quotes

From Dambank to Quarry Mount is a landscape mangled like a mongrel's scabby back with degradation. Charming like all charnel houses now the whip has fallen and the treadmill slowed, it inherits, beneath its superstructures of bawdy humour, music hall, smoky arse-orientated folklore, the hardmouthed toughness of a terrible ancient violence.
*Jeff Nuttall, **The Patriarchs**, 1978*

Mostly without horizons, the painting tilts perspective and offer the eye aerial overviews barely steadied by their frames. Flows of paint regenerate memories of walking and looking down into the hills, valleys and the line of Todmorden itself: scenes not depicted but expressed as appreciation. Each canvas radiates pleasure.
*Eric Mottram, Landscapes, **Angela Flowers Gallery**, 1987*

His Calder Valley landscapes tilt and soar with a tremendous vitality of drawing and colour
*Eric Mottram, **Dean Clough** exhibition catalogue 1990*

'...all my creative work, whether literary or visual, has been concerned with the same discord, the ecstatic violence which is detonated when nature meets ethics...

I found that the Black Mountains...provided me with the opportunity to synthesise a vocabulary of gross eroticism with a full-blooded baroque romanticism

...they do emphasise that geological and vegetable forms share shapes and parallel processes with animal (and human) digestion, gestation and reproduction, in a turbulence of decay, erosion and rebirth. My work is intended as a celebratory prayer of these things...'
*Jeff Nuttall, exhibition catalogue **Abergavenny Museum**, 1997*



Return trip

Golden in this spot. The oak with
 So many gone. The roots' cup,
 acorns level cocoa-cup - a
 All buried, the bole choked. helping
 of red sand,
 embedded

Golden this valley with bubbling
 Vomit of centuries spilled along the barrows, down
 Ant-hills, spaced writing of ridges.
 Clay cones, all levelled uprooted.

'What I loved was never nature, was culture.
 What stops pantheism's vindication is this fact:
 Lines and languages of land I long for,
 What eradicates them's rank grass, river clay.'

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Body

A good deal of Nuttall's creative output is concerned with the body in all its corporeal states. This is the body of soft skin, wounded flesh, raw matter, oozing fluids, the dark intimate places of the body. Drawings, prints and sculptural objects express a strong sense of the visceral. Many of the People Show performances scripted by Nuttall explored the objectification of the human body and were sexually explicit and provocative. They demanded the kind of audiences prepared to witness the ritualistic action and simulated disembowelling staged by Hermann Nitsch and the Viennese Action Group. In an age of the Vietnam war and escalating militarism, these kinds of artistic interactions reflected back on the real brutality elsewhere.

In Whitmanesque fashion, a number of Nuttall's poems 'sing' the body, celebrating sexual and sensorial bodily experiences and processes. A series of etchings from the 1970s have erotic themes. In 1966, Nuttall contributed drawings and poetry to a book of French erotica. A celebration of the erotic and the exploration of the pornographic image reflects Nuttall's interest in the writings of the French essayist and philosopher Georges Bataille. In 1984, he contributed work to ***Violent Silence*** – a book celebrating the work of Bataille.

Elsewhere, the seriously erotic and disturbing is countered by the comic. His suitcase assemblages bring together a macabre sensibility with dark humour and recall the junk sculptures and tableaux of American artists Ed Kienholz and Bruce Conner. Later, the cartoon

treatment given to ballooning bodies is reminiscent of seaside postcards – one of the clichéd aspects of popular culture which Nuttall explored earlier in *Common Factors/Vulgar Factions*, co-written with Rodick Carmichael and published in 1977.

Quotes



'The rubble bled with a viscid scum. Out of the strong came forth sweat said the snoring lion with his paws in syrup. Strength was the tall and giggling cavalier, was a stalking bastard with a thunderhead plume in his cap. Strength was a nodding tower of apricot cloud...'

From *The Case of Isabel and the Bleeding Foetus*, Turret Books, 1967

'Post-orgasmic sweetness of sea light dying into the hedgerow and the brown waterside grass'
From *Man Not Man*, 1975

'...

'...At orgasm I'm home.
The snapped elastic full pulled,
Climactic visions,
Spastic's kickjoint, bloodwilled,
Thrilled discord at control's collapse,
Sour resolution of a sinister perhaps,
Disprove proof....'

From 'Windows', Selected Poems, Salt Publishing, 2003

'everything he produces is an exuberant engagement with death and sensuality...'
Eric Mottram, Dean Clough exhibition catalogue 1990

All the above text by Gillian Whiteley , written in 2005