



Zap Art – Producing the Goods!

Karen Poley

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I was working as a volunteer for Brighton Festival when I saw the first Streets of Brighton in 1995. Amongst the performances, *Oceanos Satanas* by Cie Jo Bithume is still one of the best and most inspiring shows I've ever seen. The scale and ambition of this production, its fabulous realisation and the size of the audience still astound me.

About a year after this, I found myself working as a volunteer for Zap Productions on Streets of Brighton 1996. Eleven years later, I'm still working for Zap, although the wages are better now, and I've seen and worked on a few shows which come close to the *Oceanos* epic.

Weirdly, it's only me who ever asks why I'm still 'here'. It's a crazy, stressful, dream job (well mostly), which changes all the time. Things sometimes work out exactly as you've planned with everyone saying 'Yes' to even the most bizarre requests for help and support. Other times it's like wading through treacle backwards and blindfolded, and very occasionally there's a legendary gig where absolutely everything implodes and goes completely wrong.

I've helped to create and deliver over a hundred street arts festivals and events; commissioned, presented and toured new work; created educational and large scale participatory projects. I'm still inspired by the work, the potential for the work, the artists, the audiences and the people who make it all happen.

Of all the events, my favourite was Streets of Lewisham, for a wonderfully mixed, huge and appreciative audience, and a great working team within the local authority. Coldest was seven years of the Tunbridge Wells Winter Street Festival, between Christmas and New Year. Most bizarre: Streets of Guildford, dealing with police who were called to the event to investigate a report of a tortoise in the High Street carrying a gun. Most difficult: with an organisation called TS2K in Shadwell, in the midst of a blow up in gang rivalry between two estates – also the hottest event ever. This last was also one of the most rewarding. On the back of the work we did, local young people set up a stewarding company and a short lived street art company was formed.

Commissioning new work has been a key theme, with something like sixty new works commissioned under the banner of NSAF. Some were experimental, some aimed at encouraging cultural diversity, some gave companies a springboard to develop and create larger scale work; some were a nightmare. They included many fantastic successes though, like *The Elvii* by Pearshaped, *Tango Peligroso* by Lighthouse Theatre Co., *The Crowd* by Strangelings and *The Gorillas* by Creature Feature to name just a few.

Another major theme has been educational activity and we've created many projects with street artists working in schools, colleges and community groups. The culmination of these for me was an amazing event

Above top: Karen Poley © Ray Gibson

Above bottom: Transe Express, *The Lazy Kings*, rehearsal, Streets of Brighton, 2004 © Ray Gibson

Opposite: Transe Express, *The Lazy Kings*, Streets of Brighton, 2004 © Matthew Andrews

with Creative Partnerships in Slough in 2003 where, amongst others, Pearshaped created performing works of art (Munch's *The Scream*, Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* and Magritte's bowler-hatted characters) with an art class from a local school, and Desperate Men created an astonishing version of their 'Rubbish Heads' with a school drama group.

The participatory work, which has subsequently become a major feature of Zap's artistic direction, began, at least for me, during the millennium celebrations, working with Claire Halstead and Virginia Farman on the *Millennium Love Parade* and *Midwinter Madness* community parade performances in Tunbridge Wells.

My work in this area has continued to develop under the auspices of the Virtual Creation Centre with, for instance, *The Lazy Kings* by Transe Express: a giant performance in Preston Park where six parades met for an aerial finale on a sixty-foot tall coconut tree. Three of the parades were created in Brighton with two hundred local participants plus fifty volunteer performers from France. Inspiring, stressful and very hard work.

Other similar participatory projects have included *Souterrain* by WildWorks, *The Big House* by Desperate Men and *Entangled Lives* by Le Cercle de la Litote in collaboration with Ragroof Theatre. There have been many more.

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Virginia Farman and I have recently been working together on a venture outside of Zap, but which has very much developed out of this work. *Bicycle Ballet* is a spectacular dance of bicycles. We aimed for it to be political, to make a 'Car Free' day event happen in Brighton, and to involve as many local people as possible. The response and commitment was overwhelming with sixty-five people who rehearsed in driving wind and rain and cycled

up Brighton's biggest hill for rehearsals. The two shows were seen by over 3,000 people and we're re-developing it for touring.

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Karen Poley was a producer for Zap Art for eleven years. She left in September 2007.

