THE FEAST WAGON

INTRODUCTION

This publication archives and reflects upon the themes within 'The Feast Wagon' exhibition that was programmed at The Tetley 7 October – 10 January 2015.

Featuring a series of new commissions by Simeon Barclay, Delaine Le Bas, Lubaina Himid and Susan Walsh and co-curated by Kerry Harker, Zoë Sawyer and researcher Irfan Shah, the exhibition explored the history of spectacular touring shows and the influence of cultural icons in the formation of personal and collective identity.

Artists' work was produced in response to research by Leeds-based researcher and writer Irfan Shah who has extensively researched 19C moving image pioneer, Louis Le Prince and his brother-in-law, Yorkshire industrialist John Robinson Whitely who was responsible for bringing Buffalo Bill's iconic 'Wild West Show' to England in 1887 and later staging a series of large-scale national exhibitions on a patch of wasteland that become established as international exhibition centre, Earl's Court.

The project examined ideas of exchange, circulation and migration through large-scale sculptural installations, paining, collage, video and textile work, alongside displays of archive material. The Feast Wagon looked at identity and nationhood against a backdrop of today's international biennials and large-scale touring exhibitions such as British Art Show8, which launched in Leeds concurrently to The Feast Wagon.

The following essays have been commissioned to further unpick these ideas.

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ON THE MOVE: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FEAST WAGON

BY KERRY HARKER

Art and artists are always on the move, it would seem. Arts professionals and their respective projects too. The contemporary art world is characterized by international travel, dialogue and exchange in the physical world, as well as the sort of immediate global connections enabled by today's digital technologies. The recent proliferation of biennials, triennials and art fairs keeps a globetrotting cohort of curators, dealers, auctioneers, collectors and cultural tourists constantly on the move between the hotspots of London, Berlin, Venice, New York, São Paulo, Beijing and the rest.

We have also become familiar with the concept of an artist being based in two or more places, with descriptors of bi-location such as 'based in London and Berlin' on an artist's CV merely a symptom of the kind of globalised practice that now designates the 'international' artist. All of this seems perfectly natural, if not logical, in a world whose scale has been shrunk perceptually by the internet and relatively cheap international air travel. Parts of the art world at least are now truly globalised.

The Feast Wagon project began with a conversation resulting from the meticulous historical research of Leeds-based writer Irfan Shah, who has delved deeply into the story of moving image pioneer Louis Le Prince. Le Prince's story is now well known, after years of relative neglect, but Shah's research uncovered more about the fascinating context of late-nineteenth century Leeds and shed light on the no-less fascinating story of self-styled cultural impresario (and Le Prince's brother-in-law) John Robinson Whitley.

Whitley was instrumental in bringing an early exemplar of the mass-entertainment spectacular, Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West Show', to England, where it commenced a tour of the nation, and later Europe, after opening in the capital in 1887. This Yorkshire entrepreneur thereby initiated in London one of the most famous sites for large-scale exhibitions and trade fairs, which later became known as Earl's Court.

This story provides a timely way to think about the genesis, meaning and value of large-scale touring exhibitions, and about the capital and the regions, at a key moment in the history of contemporary art in this country, with the arrival of the latest iteration of the British Art Show. This large-scale group exhibition examining the current state of contemporary art being produced in the UK, occurs only every five years and is initiated by Hayward Touring in London. After opening at Leeds Art Gallery, British Art Show 8 will visit Edinburgh, Norwich and Southampton

on a mammoth tour lasting over 14 months. There is a strong sense of the show emerging from the capital and being brought to the regions, reinforced by the fact that this year, once again, the curators and vast majority of participating artists are based in London.

A consideration of the arrival of British Art Show 8 in Leeds, as well as Whitley's story, examined more closely in Irfan Shah's text for this publication, was central to the invitation extended by The Feast Wagon curators to the participating artists – Simeon Barclay, Lubaina Himid and Susan Walsh, and Delaine Le Bas. The research provides a backdrop to think through movement, migration, cultural exchange, the creation of individual and national identities, and the concept of improvement that the language of movement often implies: in speech, physical movement is used to conjure ideas of progress and self-advancement, or their opposites. We talk about 'moving on' and 'getting to a good place', of things 'going well' or of ideas gaining 'traction'. In written documents we are sometimes required to indicate the 'direction of travel' in the development of, say, an arts organization. If things aren't so good we might say we're 'not getting anywhere'.

Migration – the physical movement of peoples across national boundaries – is an agent for cultural and social change and exchange of the sort that has been fundamental to the development of human culture. The Feast Wagon seeks to embrace a tangled web of historical facts and contemporary fictions around these ideas of change and exchange, and to create new collaborative relationships and networks both between the artists, and with their audiences.

The project is not designed to illustrate the research, but to extrapolate pertinent themes and to find contemporary resonances within it, creating its own unique arena for the creation of new identities, mythologies and cultural exchanges within the historic setting of The Tetley's exhibition spaces.

Kerry Harker is founding Director of Curator.Works, a curatorial agency based in Leeds, and was co-founder and Artistic Director of The Tetley until September 2015

ON THE MARGINS

BY LARA EGGLETON

The wagon is an enduring symbol of the frontier, a reminder of the possibilities as well as the dangers of the outer edges of culture. It is through encounters with border regions that identities are made, unmade and remade, along with the definitions and categories that underpin perceptions of both the self and the Other. Anthropologist James Clifford has argued that cultural centres, 'discrete regions and territories', do not exist prior to contacts – rather, they are 'sustained through the appropriating and disciplining of the restless movements of people and things'. Through this process margins can take on a paradoxical centrality, presenting their own complex territories and networks. The Feast Wagon (TFW), co-curated by Kerry Harker, Zoë Sawyer and Irfan Shah, investigates the potential of frontier zones by attending to the fraught but nonetheless productive processes of exchange, circulation and migration.

Four artists; Simeon Barclay, Lubaina Himid, Delaine Le Bas and Susan Walsh, were invited to participate in TFW as 'agents of transformation and interpretation', each engaging in historical events and established cultural tropes as constitutive of identity construction in the present. The starting point of TFW is Irfan Shah's research on Louis Le Prince, a Leeds-based moving image pioneer, and his brother-in-law John Robinson Whitley. Whitley, whose business was near the Tetley brewery site, was instrumental in bringing Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show to London in 1887. Archival posters and press clippings show frontier exoticism in full swing – Stetsons, stallions, lassoes – bold signifiers of new beginnings, adventure, hubris and machismo.

Inspired by Le Prince's 1888 silent film of horse-drawn carriages crossing Leeds Bridge, Himid and Walsh's installation The Feast Wagons (x39) brings together a consortium of small-scale 'found and embellished' wagons and carts. Decorated with paintings of 'exotic' animals and fish, the consortium hints at the travel of non-indigenous species through commercial trade routes. The motley assembly is overseen by an effigy-wagon in the form of a long, vertical shipping crate used to transport paintings, wall-mounted with an undercarriage fashioned from skateboards. On closer inspection, some of the floor 'wagons' are in fact drawers that have been similarly mounted on skateboards, a playful evocation of the skate park as a parallel site of intersecting routes and pathways.

Susan Walsh's series of framed collages continue this theme of migration, combining elements from drawings and photographs of carriages, wagons and caravans caught in static tension. Vehicles which cannot move forward but only pull against themselves, they hint at the difficulties of cross-cultural communication and overcoming difference. In one example, a horse is supplanted by a medieval drawing of an elephant, a 'non-Western' reminder of societies traditionally left out of frontier mythology, or else on the receiving end of it. Here and elsewhere there is an attempt to tie the idea of the wagon to the deeply unequal terms of identity formation in the wake of the British Empire.

Delaine Le Bas's work brings colonial mythology crashing down to earth, sending cogs and springs flying. Bringing together curiosities - tambourines and biscuit tins depicting dancing 'gypsy types', custom-made costumes mixing flamenco polka dots with Sex Pistol t-shirts - Le Bas refracts British Romany culture through the lens of stereotype. Her hybrid ensembles expose the one-dimensionality of potted cultural tropes such as the gypsy outsider and the British punk rocker. A collection of notebooks and books, some with annotated jackets, attest to the heavy-handed interpretations of Traveller societies and their customs on the part of scholars and authors since the eighteenth century (including William Blake and Bible salesman turned ethnographer, George Borrow). A single video work, Gypsyland (2014), has an unsettling ethnographic feel, effectively blurring the line between authenticity and parody in a series of performances around London, undertaken at sites chosen from on a set of engravings from the 1800s showing 'Traditional Gypsy Stopping Places'.

An artist and activist from an English Romany background, Le Bas tests the limits of cultural borders through a

collapsing of false binaries. How can we decipher truth from myth when historical intolerances are reinforced and perpetuated in the present? Her mixed-media wall installation, Death for Being a Gypsy, boldly makes this case. Enlarged articles, documents and website pages recount the systematic oppression and weeding out of Roma in Europe and beyond, including a shocking account of gypsy hunting for sport in Switzerland and Holland during the eighteenth century. In When the hunt is on, we're always the hunted? Insurrection gitane, a vintage 'gypsy' mask hangs provocatively against a fox-hunt textile, bringing Orientalism and recreational killing into dark and unnerving dialogue.

Margins are also made central in Simeon Barclay's work, which explores the packaging of class, race and gender in a post-information, post-consumer age. Muscled pinups, rearing stallions, Heinz tomato ketchup bottles and a single shoe peer out of three stacked plastic boxes of descending sizes in An Arrangement On Grey (228); all products cast in a mould, seductively streamlined. On the wall a commercial lightbox illuminates the phrase Non Illigitamus Carborundum, translated roughly as 'Don't let the bastards grind you down'. From a Black British Caribbean, working-class background, Barclay acknowledges that even while critiquing normative modes of representation we are always influenced by, and implicated in the transaction. At the same time, his assemblages imaginatively subvert the stock categories on offer, juxtaposing and layering with purposeful grace.

Barclay's machine-finished surfaces, colours, photos and symbols are aimed

at complicating essentialised notions of class and gender by revealing inherent contradictions. The works delve into the rich intersticies between masculinity, femininity, hetero and homosexual categorisations, as found in Western fashion, sport, television and film cultures. His work is heavy with complex male characters: footballer turned actor Eric Cantona; flamboyant crooner Bryan Ferry; Albert Finney in his role as Arthur Seaton in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1960). Similarly, soft cosmetic femininity is spiked with wicked witches and stiletto heels – hybrid, thorny symbols punctuating a series of acrylic 'arrangements' in red, green, yellow and black. Two layers of imagery compete for attention - framed acrylic compositions encircle the room, mounted on a timber frame, while poster-sized faces peer out from gallery walls. Albert Finney lights a cigarette; neon lipstick glows; a model stares longingly into her smartphone. Vinyl adhesives pop and fleshy curves seduce in Barclay's slick checkerboard of associations, a cacophony that refuses coherence. In the centre of the room stands a concrete reproduction Venus after Canova, her austere classicism suggesting that very little has changed over the centuries. The artist's installations operate on the level of aspiration and desire, in the slippery, unstable territory of border zones.

The artists in TFW shed light on inner workings of cultural and personal identity formation, through which political and economic hierarchies might be confronted. The movement of people and things away from the centre and into the margins is precisely what enables social and personal transformation. As Clifford puts it, 'practices of displacement might emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension'. It is only through displacement that we gain perspective on our limitations, and thus find ourselves in a position to overcome them.

Lara Eggleton is an art writer and historian based in Leeds.

1 James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 3.

2 Clifford, p. 3.

DREAMING YOURSELF INTO THE REAL WORLD:

A short appreciation of ghost-dancers, contemporary artists and nineteenth century industrial entrepreneurs.

BY IRFAN SHAH

How do you create an exhibition about an exhibition?

In 1887, Yorkshireman John Robinson Whitley transformed a huge swathe of central London wasteland into the greatest show on earth. The American Exhibition of the Arts, Inventions, Manufactures, Products and Resources of the United States of America had been designed to showcase the very best of the New World. At its heart lay a vast building of iron and glass in and around which American businesses displayed their wares, artists exhibited their works and inventors demonstrated their freshly-patented miracles. The exhibition was, from the moment it opened, a sensation.

However what had really caught the public imagination was the residency there of William F Cody (aka Buffalo Bill) and his Wild West show, a huge moving panorama of scenes from frontier life which included sharpshooting; displays of horsemanship; days in the life of plains Indians and recreations of various skirmishes and battles. A marvel of logistics and physical theatre, the show was an epic moveable feast which had previously toured the States and included Cody himself; the sharp shooter Annie Oakley and: "bands of Indians (110 in number), …cowboys…and Mexican prairie riders, to the number of about 150, with 170 'bronco' horses and Indian ponies, comprising some wild and incorrigible 'buckers'; twelve mules, sixty-four various tents, a dozen different … emigrant-wagons, nine elk, two deer, eight wild Texas steers, sixteen buffaloes, 200 Mexican and cowboy saddles, 100 Indian saddles, with a formidable armoury of American and Indian weapons; and last of all the famous Deadwood stage-coach, in the same condition as when last attacked by Indians and highwaymen".

This strange 'cargo' had been transported across the Atlantic Ocean on the SS State of Nebraska to Earls Court in London.

Amongst the visitors to the Wild West show were Queen Victoria, William Ewart Gladstone, James Abbott McNeil Whistler, Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker all of whom came to a vast dirt arena adjacent to the main exhibition, to watch Cody and his Rough Riders fend off wave after wave of Indian attack in their twice daily 'salvation' of America.

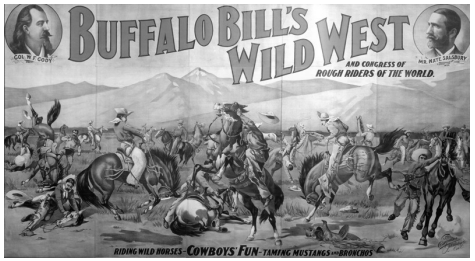
Many of the characters drawn to, and involved in, this great Victorian sensation, from Stoker to Wilde to Buffalo Bill, were so much larger than life that even now they seem to inhabit the borderlands between fact and fiction. And it was these people – and this world created by Whitley in which they all met – which was decided upon as the basis for 2015's The Feast Wagon Exhibition at The Tetley.

It seemed an appropriate choice for various reasons. Its sweep and spectacle were ideal for Leeds, a city about to host the British Art Show for the first time in twenty-five years, and the long, snaking progress of the BAS across the country seemed to echo the traveling nature of Cody's Wild West. The thematic links with industry were also apt, as Leeds (once at the heart of the Industrial Revolution) is again a thriving city. And then there was the link with John Whitley who had come from Leeds and had even run a factory, The Old Railway Works brass foundry, just a few hundred meters from where The Tetley building stands.

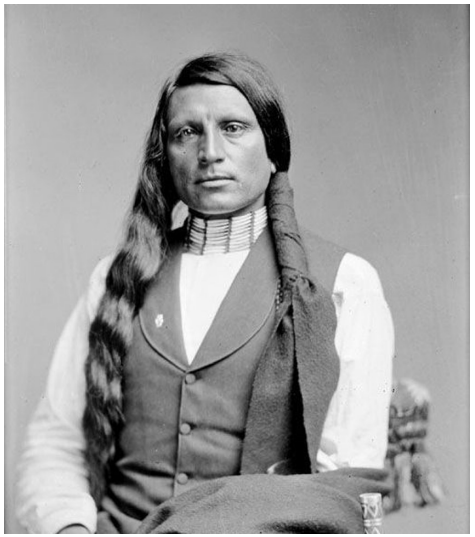
Yet despite these connections, bringing the story of what was essentially a huge, sprawling nineteenth century trade fair to a contemporary art gallery was always going to involve an element of dislocation. As one kind of exhibition was re-interpreted by another, a clutch of conventional research materials (memoirs, photographs, newspaper articles) were passed through The Tetley looking glass to be transformed into a confetti of abstractions – Movement; Industry; Myth-Making; Spectacle – all to be explored in a process which would inevitably entail a dismantling of facts, a re-imagining of history and a loosening of the bonds of chronology and cohesion.

However bewildering this process might seem to a conventional researcher, the progression from discrete historical 'data' to free artistic expression has a resonance with one very particular aspect of the story of the American exhibition: the idea that so much of what lay at its heart was itself based on a dissembling and re-imagining of reality. In fact, on a closer inspection of the Exhibition of 1887, it seems that the bounds of chronology and coherence had been slipped already, a long time ago...

> "After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence."
>
> – Oscar Wilde, The Decay of Lying.



William F Cody (aka Buffalo Bill) and Chief Red Shirt of the Oglala Sioux were the real things....at least to an extent.



Red Shirt was a well respected tribal chief heading up a team of performers drawn from a range of tribes. He had long been seen as an ambassador for Native Americans and had promoted peaceful integration with the white settlers. And yet, in London, as in the States, he and his band of 'fearsum injuns' became little more than ciphers, characters in the Wild West performances which staged hopelessly inaccurate and idealised versions of real events such as the Battle of Little Bighorn; performances which, according to historian Louis S Warren:

"invited people to draw a line between real and fake, historical and representative".

Little Bighorn, in reality a brutal and protracted massacre, became a swift and family-friendly ballet of horse and rider - an act of proto-disneyfication which sought to package and present a salutary view of new, post-colonial America. Cody described one performance attended by the Prince of Wales:

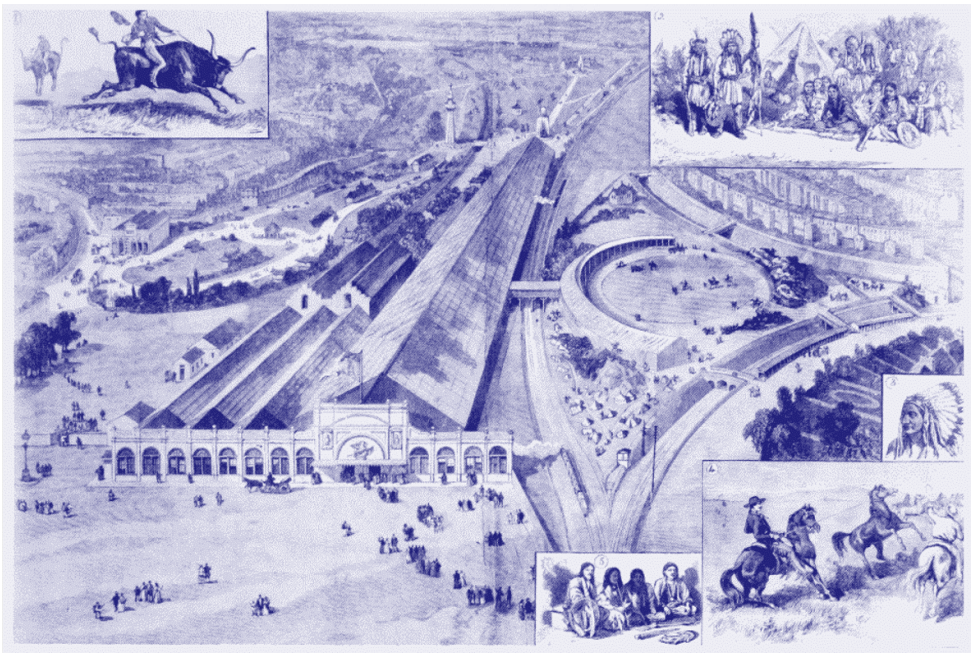
"…the Indians, yelling like fiends, galloped out from their ambuscade and swept around the enclosure like a whirlwind. The effect was instantaneous and electric. The Prince rose from his seat and leaned over the front of the box, and the whole party seemed thrilled at the spectacle."

'Spectacle' is a telling word to use. Victorian entertainment was always careful to come with a Moral attached and the Wild West show was indeed presented as an educational Life Picture of recent American history, but it was spectacular, sensational, larger than life - and how much of it was actually real was a moot point.

And as for John Robinson Whitley himself, his own 'story' was an intriguing mix of boast and alibi. In the 1870's, for example, having run his family business into the ground, he was forced to 'disappear' out of the reach of creditors. However, in the book 'Four Exhibitions,' we see a different version of events:

"Ill-health from overwork induced him to relinquish his share in the family business, and to seek rest, combined with new ideas, in travel."

This brazen mis-remembrance is just one of several to be found in accounts of his life. He who tells his own story, controls his own fate. But when stories intersect,



curious and revealing juxtapositions can occur. Take, for example, Whitley's account of his first encounter with Cody:

"Probably…the boss cowboy, 'Buffalo Bill,' was never more surprised in his life, by either Indians or buffaloes, than he was by me, on the day I walked through a morass of mud in a field near Washington City, and told him that if he would bring his picture of life in the 'Wild West' to London, I would ensure him a hearty welcome."

Now see how Cody's own account of this involves a less than subtle re-positioning of the spotlight:

"One day an Englishman, whose name I never learned, came to see me after the show.

'That is a wonderful performance' he told me. 'Here in America it meets with great appreciation, but you have no idea what sensation it would be in the Old World, where such things are unheard of.'

That set me to thinking. In a few days….I had made up my mind that Europe should have an opportunity to study America…through the medium of my entertainment."

It is collisions of narrative like this which remind us of the false authority of the printed word.

"A great artist invents a type, and life tries to copy it" said Oscar Wilde, a visitor to the 1887 exhibition and a fan of the Wild West show (he loved the west's 'open-air life and free open-air manners') Seen in this context, Buffalo Bill is a kind of Wildean archetype, a noble 'Centaur' who leapt from the pages

of one of his own dime novels to create a new, flamboyant template for heroism. Whitley, and Red Shirt followed similar paths, too, both of whom, in various different ways, became actors in imagined histories.

To Wilde, self-invention wasn't deception but art, and the blurring of lines between author and character, literal and poetic truth, was not just desirable but necessary. As he wrote in the Decay of Lying:

"The only real people are the people who never existed."

"After the horse dance was over, it seemed that I was above the ground and did not touch it when I walked....Even the horses seemed healthier and happier after the dance." Black Elk.

Wilde's flamboyant stand-off with reality has a curious echo in the belief systems of many of the Native Americans involved with the Wild West show. These performers, which included Red Shirt and a young Black Elk, were part of a lineage of Native American dream culture which went from the circle dances of prehistoric times to the ghost dance movement of 1890 onwards. Visions, induced by various means gave the receiver access to stories and images which would be interpreted and put to use for the good of the tribe.

"Things are because we see them, and what to see and how to see it depends on the arts that have influenced us". Oscar Wilde in the 'Decay of Lying'

For Red Shirt and Black Elk, experiencing hallucinatory or dreamlike states was integral not to escaping reality, but to shaping an understanding of it, perhaps to achieving communion with a more intense version of it as well. Red Shirt had fallen into a trance while on a visit to the 'Great White Lodge' of Westminster Abbey and had described a performance of Faust at the Lyceum Theatre as 'like a dream', and Black Elk had first experienced his visions at the age of nine - these were all moments of deep engagement with life.

The very fact that Native Americans from all parts of the United States were now camped together out in the middle of a damp and grey London would have been a dream-like experience in itself.

Visiting Earls Court for the first time, they would have seen the grounds fill with curious visitors during the day, and at night would have seen the great expanse lit by lucigen lights and bonfires. A large hill had been created for the Indian encampment, covered by newly planted trees. The illusion of place was to be set off by a huge painted panorama of the West against which countless battles were to play out over the coming months. Real and yet unreal.

And as for the British public's perceptions of them…

"Looking upon the chiefs, braves, and squaws, one could not help recalling the delightful sensations of youth – the first acquaintance with the last of the Mohicans, The Great Spirit, Fire Water, Laughing Water, and the dark huron warrior." [The Daily News, Saturday April 16 1887]
The Redskin was a mythical creature, a

pantomime villain, a traditional shorthand for savagery. Nevertheless, the Indians had been greeted – welcomed – with a mix of awe curiosity by the British.

And behind the staged performances of the Wild West show, with its simplistic glorification of American manifest destiny, the cast of the show existed together in a hidden harmony. Writing of a later (but generally comparable) Wild West tour, an article in the Swindon Advertiser described the scenes in the 'interior of the dressing tent' as having:

"presented a curious spectacle indeed. Dusky Indians were stalking about in the most fantastical of garbs; negroes of the darkest hue and white gleaming teeth were at their toilette; in one corner was a swarthy nigger giving a Cuban a close crop; in another corner a Mexican was cutting a cowboy's hair ….in every part of this big tent was something taking place, and the more one saw the more he became interested, and thought what a really happy family these many coloured and strange tongued people were."

This passage speaks of the camaraderie of show business and also the solidarity of the dispossessed. The Native Americans often found themselves in the age old position of being excluded whilst still being able to observe from close hand – a position often common to ethnic minorities, servants and artists.

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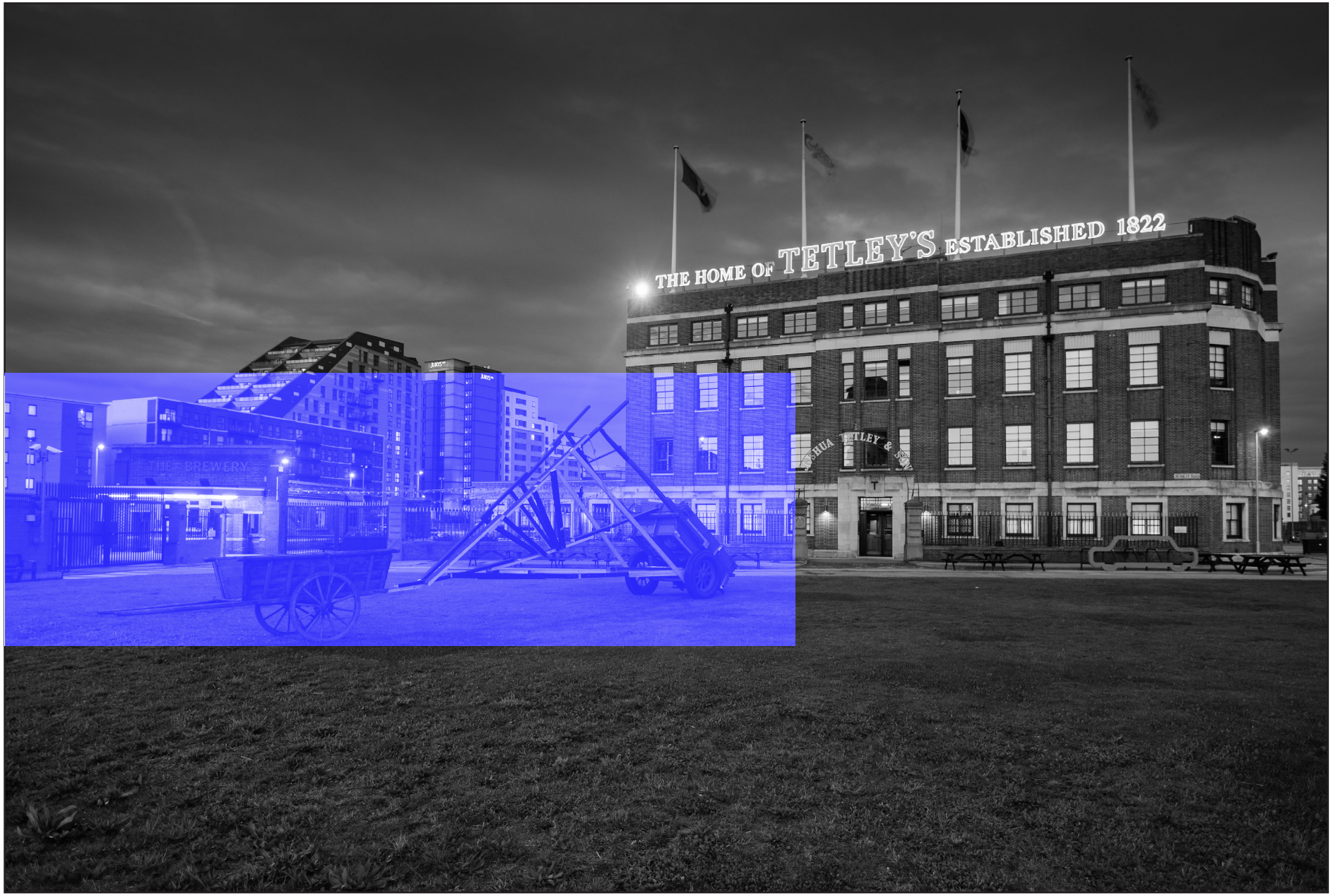
THE HOME OF TETLEY'S ESTABLISHED 1822
THE BREWERY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

BY IRFAN SHAH

Perhaps because of this vantage point on life, a Greek chorus of sorts could be constructed from the thoughts of Black Elk as well as of Wilde - the receiver of visions and the writer, two figures who are simultaneously outsiders and at the heart of things. And perhaps there was within each of Black Elk's visions, a perceiving of greater truths - which is, in some respects, a persuasive view of the function of art.

"I looked about me and could see that what we were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here." Black Elk

Life as an almost illusory state of being, beyond which are profundities accessible only through art or religion takes us from Wildean aesthetics to Native American dream theories and leads us past the brittle facts of history to a vivid spread of perspectives on the concept of story-telling and myth-making, seen variously as an invention of the self; a repurposing of history; a personal liberation; art or religion, both or a little of everything. The awareness of multiple perspectives, unreliable narrators and the subjective nature of experiences in turn leads us to an intoxicating dissolution of the academic process whereby Feast Wagon's factual basis succumbs to the greater truths of artistic expression.

And so we come back to the original question. How do you create an exhibition about an exhibition?

"This ceremony was not a long one, but it had meaning, because it made a picture of the relationship between the people and the bison, and the power was in the meaning."

from 'Black Elk Speaks'

Taking research material on the American Exhibition of 1887 to a contemporary art gallery is an aesthetic choice.

Whitley's many-acred wonderland was a well-documented phenomenon: run by a limited company with accounts posted at Companies House, it had maps; plans; posters; contracts; speeches and hundreds if not thousands of newspaper articles written about it. Its thousands of exhibits were organized into six main sections and then subdivided into hundreds more. Everything about it seemed to be listed, defined, unambiguous. And yet at the very heart of the enterprise lay characters who exaggerated, lied, performed, embellished and dreamt, just as at the heart of anything there are people who exaggerate, lie, perform, embellish and dream. Nothing is quite what it seems – reality is malleable in the hands of an artist.

We are, all of us, stories. And these stories pulse and change and ultimately escape the confines of conventional research. Occasionally, a new perspective is needed.

And so, to the writer and the receiver of visions we now add the figure of the contemporary artist as an agent of transformation and interpretation in the same way that the Native American ghost dancers were. And here at The Tetley, the 'museum pieces' - those primary sources, documents, and photographs - simply become the artifacts prepared for the ceremony ahead. We hand them to the artists to dissemble and re-imagine as they prepare to induce the new visions, and to remind us of what Wilde and Red Shirt and Black Elk knew already - that art is the act of dreaming yourself into the real world.

Irfan Shah is a Leeds-based researcher and writer.

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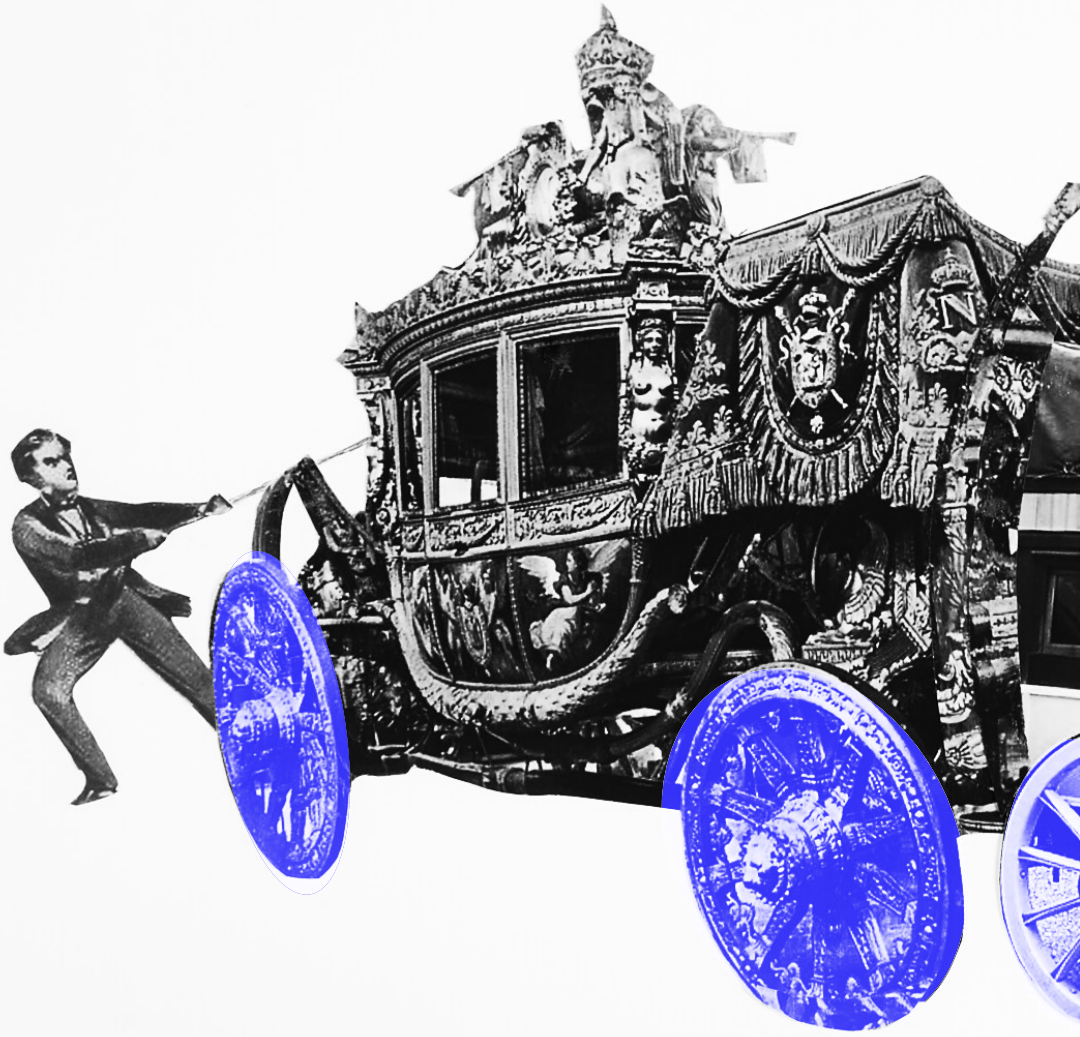

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