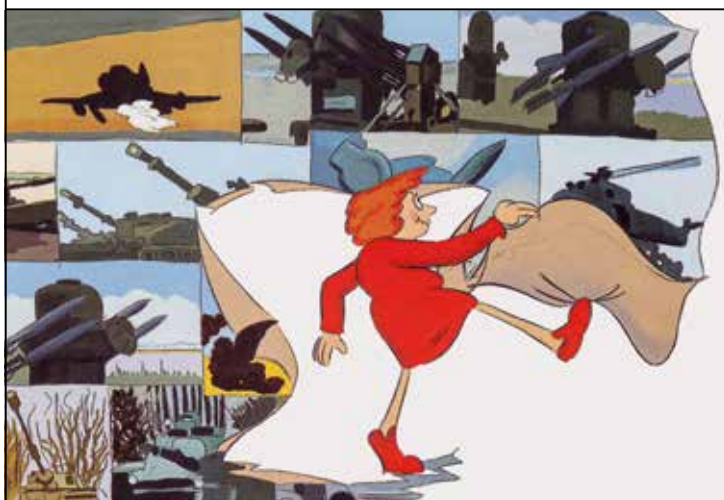


Leeds Animation Workshop

The most complete revision to date of Leeds Animation Workshop, a feminist independent film collective, founded in 1978. Spanning the past four decades, the more than forty short films produced by the collective deal with subjects such as inequality, sexism, racism, workplace harassment and social policy issues in the United Kingdom and Europe.

ONCE UPON A TIME



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We were members of the post-war generation, overwhelmingly alienated from our parents and the lives they were leading. Their inability to talk about the traumas they experienced during the war years, and our inability to understand them, had created a gulf between us. All we knew was that the past was war and misery; the present was restrictive; and the future needed to be different.

Terry Wragg, member of Leeds Animation Workshop (2019, p. 61)

This exhibition presents, for the first time nationally and internationally, the full filmography of Leeds Animation Workshop (LAW), the independent feminist animated film collective founded in Leeds, England, in 1978. The founders of LAW were young women from various backgrounds, including sociology, education and experimental theatre, who met and came together through various groups dedicated to feminist liberation. In this way, they comprised the first and longest-lasting women's animated film collective in Great Britain.

LAW was part of a network of radical, independent film collectives that arose in the 1970s and 1980s.¹ This was a unique period for British film, a time when cinema was produced and distributed that transformed the dominant film industry through practices in collective, integrated production, encompassing production, distribution and exhibition. This cinema was also transformative for its subject matter and ways of opposing the status quo (Thomson, 2020).

Ever since it was created, LAW advanced a way of working that was non-hierarchical and collective, using animation as the means of expression. While over the course of these four decades the roles, production mechanisms and techniques have varied, the political and social engagement of the group has been maintained.

Still from *Pretend You'll Survive*, 1981.

¹ Some other feminist collectives in the 1970s and 1980s were Sheffield Film Co-op, Four Corners Films, Red Flannel and Twentieth Century Vixen.

The films produced by LAW address real problems in contemporary politics, and were often accompanied by brochures to encourage debate. The work was based on detailed research and involved long consultation processes, often of a local nature, but also working nationally and internationally. The films deal with issues relating to childcare, problems in labour contexts, nuclear proliferation, privatisation, sexual harassment and sexism, the housing crisis, world debt, environmental contamination, mourning as experienced by adults and young people, as well as harassment and racism at school, amongst other subjects.

Over its more than four decades of existence, the collective produced and distributed more than forty short films, the first being done during the governments of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, when labour reform, privatisation and weakened access to public services undermined the social state.

Leeds, which since 1968 had stood out as a city with leftist, anti-racist and feminist counterculture, policies, was also the base for the Leeds Nursery Film Group. A women's collective that members of LAW were also part of, through it they came together to create *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* (1978). This short film points to the lack of public preschools. As with many of their films, the subject is presented with humour in an entertaining manner, and adopts a unique perspective, in this case through the point of view of Tracy, a four-year-old girl.

Who Needs Nurseries? We Do! was done entirely on celluloid, taking two full years to finish. Animation work on celluloid, also known as traditional animation or cartooning, is one of the oldest and most laborious 2D animation methods.² At this point there were few places in the UK, especially outside London, where it was possible to find professional animation facilities. Despite this, as Terry Wragg has observed, animation

² The characters and objects are drawn by hand, frame by frame, on transparent celluloid sheets, until the movement or scene is made. Once drawn, they are coloured. Afterwards, the cels are placed on painted backgrounds to be photographed one by one, creating a moving image.

had its benefits: "Because animation is so condensed, and uses symbols instead of real people, it helps you understand different points of view very succinctly" (Tasker, 2016, p. 123).³

After LAW was founded in 1978, the first film they did was *Risky Business* (1980), which responded to new legislation on workplace health and safety. It was based on an in-depth investigation of factory working conditions and labour practices. The main character is called Carol, a union representative who, aided by the robot Reggie, seeks to respond to the problems workers face. *Like Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* before it, it was done entirely on celluloid.

In their film work, LAW carefully selected the voices of their characters, giving place to a diversity of accents and vocabularies; in turn, real local architecture would serve to reference specific places. For *Risky Business* they used the voices of local people, and created settings based on real places, all of which went along with another characteristic of their filmography: surrealist features. In this film, for example, the dust becomes a monster, the machines come to life and chemical fumes turn into snakes.

Music is also another important aspect in their productions. LAW commissioned original musical and memorable rhythmic melodies, as heard in *Risky Business*, *Council Matters* (1984) and *Alice in Wasteland* (1991), which were able to maintain their critical spirit while catching the attention of viewers, garnering their complicity.

In 1981, *Pretend You'll Survive* was made. With this film without dialogue, they experimented with the potential of sound and images. It was created as a tool for the anti-nuclear movement. LAW did extensive research into the effects of radiation, the dangers of the nuclear industry and the impact of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Wragg, 2019, p. 63). The title itself alludes to the name of a brochure produced by the Margaret Thatcher government in the context of

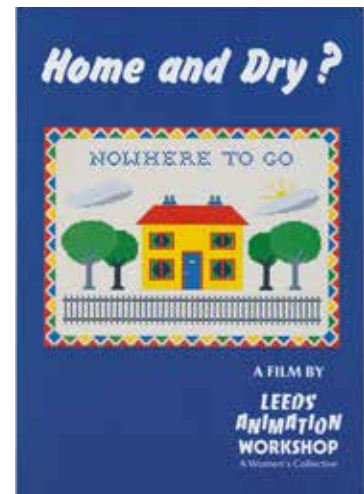
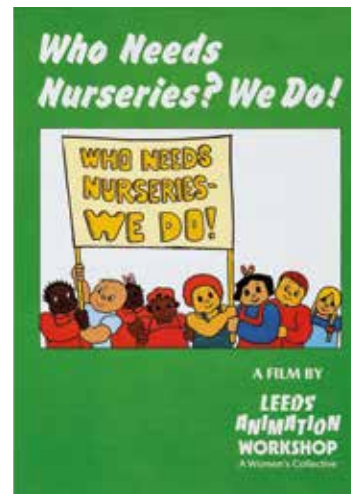
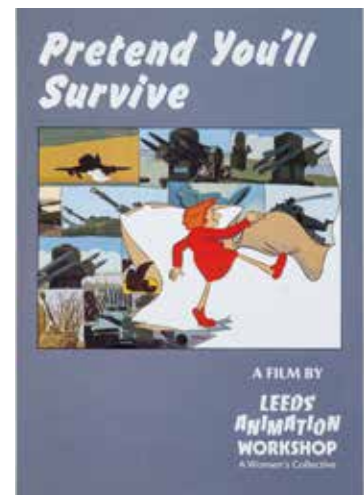
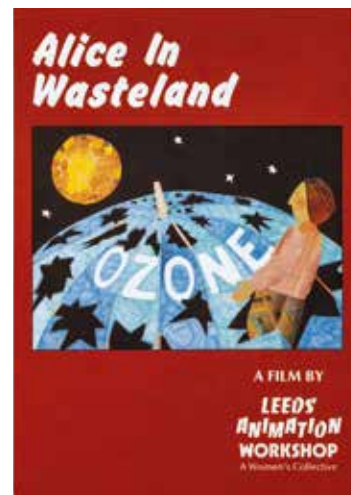
³ Yvonne Tasker (2016), "An Interview with Terry Wragg on the Work of the Leeds Animation Workshop". In *Feminist Media Histories*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 122-132.

the Cold War, *Protect and Survive*, which was distributed to British homes in 1980. While the official publication instructed the population how to protect itself in case of a nuclear attack, in the film, with its critical yet humorous perspective, the main character reworks the subject matter, proposing a new slogan: “Don’t Pretend. Protest!”

In those years, LAW’s activity was promoted through flyers and underground or alternative newspapers and magazines. The films themselves were shown in schools, in educational and training sessions, or to audiences of feminist or union groups. They soon began to be seen by broader audiences through their programming on Channel 4, which was created in 1982 in the United Kingdom, with the idea of distributing and promoting independent audiovisual production. For its part, in 1981 *Pretend You’ll Survive* was included by Clare Kitson, the London Film Festival animation programmer, on her selection of the British animated films of the year.

In the context of the 1982 Workshop Declaration,⁴ the British Film Institute (BFI) funded their next project, *Give Us a Smile* (1983).⁵ Through the Housing the Cinema Fund, LAW were able to purchase a small home in Leeds, where they made it. In the middle of the 1980s, they were able to purchase their own production equipment, with a Channel 4 subsidy enabling them to obtain a rostrum camera and a Steenbeck editing table, which are still found in this same studio (Wragg, 2020, p. 64).

Give Us a Smile was the first of their animated shorts to combine live action with traditional cartooning. It reflects on the problem of harassment of women, including comments on the street, gender stereotypes and physical violence. All of



⁴ The *Workshop Declaration* (1982-1989) was an agreement between the British Film Institute (BFI), Channel 4, the Regional Arts Associations (RAAs), the Independent Film and Video Association (IFVA), the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) and the National Organisation of Workshops (NOW).

⁵ The BFI covered a working programme, including production, distribution, exhibition and related education for *Give Us a Smile*, as well as some LAW projects done in the following years.

Flyer from *Alice in Wasteland*, 1991.

Flyer from *Pretend You'll Survive*, 1981.

Flyer from *Who Needs Daycare? We Do!*, 1978.

Flyer from *Home and Dry?*, 1987.



Still from *Working with Care*, 1999.
Still from *Did I Say Hairdressing? I meant Astrophysics*, 1998.

Postcard from *Pretend You'll Survive*, 1981.
Postcard from *Risky Business*, 1980.



EXECUTIVE STRESS?

Postcard from *All Stressed Up*, 1993.

the words spoken by the male voices were taken from real life, whether from written reports or the personal experiences of the filmmakers. The film also shows the institutional violence inflicted on women by the legal system and police forces. As seen in other films by , instead of treating women as vulnerable victims, here the emphasis is on visualising collective strategies in the feminist struggle.

In the years following, LAW made *Council Matters* (1984), featuring Freda, the cleaning lady at the town hall, who rides her flying vacuum cleaner, the *hoovercopter*, as she explains the inner workings of the town hall, the public services it offers and what their lives would be like without them. Afterwards they did *Crops and Robbers* (1986), which like *Give Us a Smile* combines cartooning and live action, analysing how food aid and commerce are related to exploitation, slavery, colonialism and racism.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the funding system was drastically altered. The free-market values promoted by Conservative governments in Britain put pressure on the principles of non-hierarchical working methods, collective management and control over all stages, including production, distribution and exhibition, that were typical of collectives working at that time (Robson, 2020, p. 130). Some collectives disbanded, while others resisted and continued to remain true to their own working identities, as was the case with LAW.

In the early 1990s, LAW changed its methodology. For every project, each member chose an area to work on—characters, background, plot script, animation script or the animation itself—and specialised in it for that film. Despite this choice for specialisation, all decision-making and working processes were shared. At that time, the main animation technique was based on cutouts. (Wragg, 2019, p. 65).

Of the many short films produced in the 1990s, special mention should be made of four cartoons that refer back to children's literature and fairy tales, from whose opening lines ("Once upon a time...") this exhibition takes its title.

Through these four films, LAW took on the subjects of equal opportunity in employment (*Through the Glass Ceiling*, 1994),

work-place harassment (*No Offence*, 1996), the reasons for the minor presence of women in the sciences, engineering and technology (*Did I Say Hairdressing? I Meant Astrophysics*, 1998) and the complex connections between work, life and caregiving (*Working with Care*, 1999). In these films, the main characters deal with real, contemporary problems in fantasy settings.

Featuring female characters, and narrated by Alan Bennett, a recognised British playwright, actor and script-writer, this series revisits children's stories to disarm and subvert the prejudices and stereotypes historically created by this literary genre. Their meticulously-designed characters go about resolving the various obstacles faced along the way, often with the help of other women, such as fairy godmothers, sisters or female scientists.

This engagement with fairy tales, along with the use of animation, opens up an intimate, familiar space for reflection, without losing the capacity for critical analysis when dealing with subject matter that is not related to this imaginary realm. The short films do not share the grammar of critical theory and experimental film, although they do respond to common concerns through different strategies. The films are made using accessible language, and are entertaining; when appropriate, they feature humour. These are all characteristics that run through LAW's entire body of work. Moreover, the intertext of children's literature evokes a world of possibilities, reminding us of the power of the imagination. Fantasy is also present in the very technique used by the collective, with colourful cartooning that is delicate and funny, as well as arduous, intelligent and complex.

In the years following, LAW took on new issues while addressing newer audiences, such as young people or those with learning difficulties. Their films encourage dialogue on the issues of harassment at school, domestic violence towards women and children and environmental pollution.

From 2002 to 2007, LAW created a body of animated films dedicated to the subject of grief and mourning: *Grief in the Family*, (2002), *Not Too Young To Grieve* (2005) and *Teenage Grief* (2007). These films analyse the ways young adults and

children deal with loss, and how adults might be able to help them. They emphasise the importance of speaking with children about death clearly and sincerely, encouraging communication in family settings where mutual support is possible.

After this, they did a series addressed to people with learning difficulties, depicting them on the screen. The voices of all the characters are by actors with the corresponding disabilities. The series is comprised of the films *Everyone Can Save Energy* (2008), which looks at ways to save energy and fight climate change, *Getting Together* (2010), which explains how to meet people and bond with them, and *Getting Better* (2010) and *Getting Better in Hospital* (2011), both of which talk about different scenarios related to hospitals and visits to the doctor.

They Call Us Maids: The Domestic Workers' Story (2015), is one of LAW's most recent productions. It was created in collaboration with Justice 4 Domestic Workers (J4DW), the organisation representing female immigrant domestic workers living and working in private homes in Britain. These women mostly come from Asia and Africa. Many of them have had to escape situations of abusive treatment by their employers, faced with the added factor that for many, this line of work is their only means of subsistence. In the organisation, the women have found a space of refuge and mutual support, using it to fight for freedom, rights and justice. *They Call Us Maids: The Domestic Workers' Story*, tells the stories of women who have had to find work in other countries to support their families, leaving their places of birth, while once abroad they find themselves isolated and subject to abuse. The film analyses the troubling manifestations of modern slavery. In 2018, *They Call Us Maids: The Domestic Workers' Story* won the award for Best UK Film on Modern Slavery, in the Unchosen Modern Slavery Short Film Competition.

With this exhibition, taking us through more than forty years of inspiring work by Leeds Animation Workshop, we wish to invite visitors young and old into a space that is intimate and accessible, enabling us to think humanly and collectively of ways to transform reality, just like when somebody reads us a story.

Victoria Sacco

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