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Wildness Makes This World

Matthew Cowan

As an artist who is usually engaged with folklore and its performance, especially “Wildman” characters as they appear in folk rituals across Europe, I am especially interested in the connections between wildness, folklore, and the marking of place. In the exhibition *Wildness Makes This World*, at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki Finland, I worked with a group of 12 local people to mark places that defined wildness for them personally and communally. The product of these conversations between myself as an artist researcher and each participant was an artwork that was included in the final exhibition. The title of the exhibition project takes up William Cronon’s suggestion that wildness “can be found anywhere.” It was a presentation that approached the concept of wildness as it relates to the folklore of everyday life, place, and memory and attempted to articulate this as an exhibition. In this chapter, I reflect on this project and how peoples’ experience of wildness is connected to points of folklore and personal significance.

As an artist who is engaged with folklore and its performance rituals, especially “Wildman” characters as they appear in traditional folk rituals across Europe, I am particularly interested in the connections between wildness, folklore, and the marking of place. This led to a recent artistic survey of wildness and its connotations in

Seinäjoki, Finland in the exhibition *Wildness Makes This World*, at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki, which took place from 9 December 2020 to 6 March 2021.

My pathway as an artist has usually been to seek out folklore and traditional customs and their practitioners, and through these encounters and exchanges reflect and present them in artistic documents, as a way of understanding and re-considering how folklore impacts our lives. My approach is as both an insider and an outsider – as on one hand I have a background as a folk dancer performing English Morris dances and Mummers plays, but on the other hand, I am operating as a contemporary artist in the world of contemporary art, a milieu that comes with its own set of rituals, frameworks, and contextualisation.

Artistically, I seek those things where I might encounter spectacle and wonder as a folk performer myself, often through the act of putting on a mask or a costume and performing. But it is also about the opportunity to understand how folklore is connected to tradition and its strong thread of connection to the local. These things – the transformations that costumes and masks offer, the kinds of meanings that are produced by this sense of tradition and the logic of place – are continually at play in my art practice.

Digging deeper, I find it is always the process of the disruption of order and the folkloric chaos of costumed performances that interests me. I think primarily of “wildman” traditions such as Strawbears (*Stroh bären*) and Maymen (*Maimänner*) in Germany, the Burryman and the Jack in the Green in the UK, and many more folk devils and wild beasts and their annual appearances in carnivals and calendar rituals throughout Europe. These customs often involve a central character – a wildman bringing a sense of focus, danger, chaos, and joyous unpredictability to a community event (Forth, [2007](#)). Such folk rituals create a moment of spectacle that unfolds as

chaotic and wild in marking meaning in place between audiences and participants.

They disrupt the everyday through their performance in a way that Terry Eagleton

links to a process of carnivalesque deconstruction, where chaos and disorder

indicate a state of being, a wildness that defies meaning (Eagleton, [2019](#), p. 27).

This combination of elements – of a performative folk tradition involving costumes,

an audience, and a spectacle is one sense of invoking the wildness that I am

interested in; however, I also seek to explore other understandings of wildness, that

can take place in the everyday.

A traditional characteristic of wildness was evident in customs such as the Strawbear

and the Mayman, which were the protagonists of a previous exhibition of mine, *The*

Scream of the Strawbear, presented at Kunsthalle Giessen in 2019. Both the

Mayman and the Strawbear are wildmen at the centre of village-level community

celebrations in Hesse, and after the exhibition was completed I reflected on the

essential wildness of these traditions. What was this chaos that they performed and

enacted? What did people gain from the experience of observing the spectacle year

after year, of participating in the tradition as both performers and audience, and

remembering it from years gone by? I began to understand that this kind of wild

disruption is an essential community focus.

My interest in this folkloric wildness, then, comes from accessing the communal

instinct for chaos and spectacle. I became interested to test this definition against

others' ideas of what it could mean. I wanted to understand people's experience of

wildness in other senses – including the experience of nature, but also reaching into

more psychological and communal experiences.

The invitation to make an exhibition project with Kunsthalle Seinäjoki provided the

perfect opportunity. In this Finnish context I was interested in the kinds of wildness

that could be translated as “*raivoisuus*,” which evokes the wildness and unpredictability you might find in a wild animal, as well as “*jylhyys*,” which evokes more of the grandeur of the natural environment. Discussing these translations with a group of people living close to Seinäjoki, whilst exploring landscapes, buildings, and environments both in and around the wider region of South Ostrobothnia, became an important part of the process of making the exhibition.

As an artistic researcher, there is always the question of how the process of working artistically is attempting to *make-sense-of*. In this project, I saw that there was a chance to bring many different perspectives and experiences together as a way of reflecting. The result was an artistic survey, making sense of wildness through the experience of many. Personal folkloric memories, stories, and experiences of place were shared and presented alongside an understanding of the wildness connected to them, and the role that wildness has played in having an impact on memory and understanding.

Standard definitions of wildness often separate the idea from the realm of nature itself, thereby defining it as a process, a quality, or a mode. It can then usually be thought of in one of two ways. Firstly, that wildness is *another*, something that represents a threshold, and secondly, that wildness is a tonic, or a state of being or place that people are drawn to, that might provide insight (Cookson, [2011](#), p. 188).

Both of these ideas or approaches, however, rely on accepting that wildness is something that is beyond being totally understood, described, or made tangible, and this might explain why it is that wildness is both an attractive and a dangerous state to seek out.

In Francis Alÿs’ video *The Nightwatch* ([2004](#)), in which he releases a fox into the National Portrait Gallery in London to roam the galleries, and Mark Wallinger’s

Sleeper (also [2004](#)), in which he himself nocturnally roams the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in a bear costume, animal wildness acts, amongst other things, as a symbolic disruptor of convention and a metaphor for art's fascination with animal chaos and imagery. Works like these give an idea of the connotations that artworks might draw from wildness and its symbolic power as a connection to other possibilities for inhabiting familiar worlds.

William Cronon suggests that wildness “can be found anywhere” (Cronon, [1996](#), p. 24). Such a statement appeals to the sense that wildness is not simply related to nature, or the wild animals we might encounter in nature, but really belongs to a psychological state of being. It is like a mode that we slip into through experience of a situation or environment. Through observation and reflection of such experiences we can unlock this mode, and its qualities.

The artworks that were included in the final presentation of *Wildness Makes This World* sought to bring together these different ways of understanding wildness and its psychological modes of being. As an artistic presentation, the exhibition had the chance to dwell on the intangibility of the experience of wildness from a multitude of perspectives and mark the knowledge of these experiences through connections to place, which was in the case of this exhibition Seinäjoki and the wider region of South Ostrobothnia. As the exhibition developed it became clear that the artistic potential for dealing in imagination was uniquely suited to presenting this work. It had the opportunity to connect with the intangibility of the wildness at the heart of the show, whilst suggesting that memory and experience were the essential currency of how we come to know wildness.

Usually, my collaborative practice is with experts or special practitioners of folklore and with historical museums. However, my process in approaching *Wildness Makes*

This World was to open up this collaborative way of working to people from many backgrounds, including a small orchestra and the Seinäjoki Museums. This way of working was rewarding and interesting for me as I had to firstly re-understand my status as an outsider – as an artistic “expert” – in order to have conversations with participants. The questions I asked were not only specifically about the expert knowledge of others, but also about personal understandings, experiences, and skills.

The initial stage of the process was to work with a group of 12 people who lived in the city of Seinäjoki and the surrounding region, in order to mark places that defined wildness for them personally or communally. The product of these conversations between myself as an artist researcher and each participant was an artwork that was included in the final exhibition. These artworks connected people’s experience of wildness with points of folklore and personal significance. The title of the exhibition project takes up William Cronon’s suggestion that wildness is able to be found in many places, but also suggests that it has a productive effect on us. The exhibition surveyed the possibility that wildness could be a mode of being that we experience at particular times and places, and that these experiences can produce deep personal meaning. It was a collective presentation that approached the concept of wildness as it relates to the folklore of everyday life, place, and memory and an attempt to articulate this as an exhibition.

Conversations with each participant unfolded in different ways over the course of the year preparing for the show. Some referred me immediately to specific places in the landscape, while others offered many options to define an understanding of wildness. Overall, options for producing work with most people did not finalise until close to the time of presenting the exhibition. As a visitor to Seinäjoki, I was aware of

my status as an outsider as I learned about the places that were important to people. Meetings with participants were social and conversational as we talked about the project. Although this working process touched on ethnographic practice with questions and field notes, it was primarily a process that was always openly moving towards the production of artistic works. Sometimes there were stories from childhood, and sometimes there were discussions about what feelings or emotions were stimulated in certain places. Over time we came to an agreement about a place that represented wildness for each participant and then we worked on a process of documenting, and sometimes performing in, these places with images and video. People were incredibly generous with their time and their reflections. Everyone considered the wildness of place and the phenomena that best evoked a definition of wildness for them. What emerged through the discussions and collaborations were universal commonalities: childhood nostalgia, family memories, sites where adrenaline is experienced, and a sense of connection to points in the landscape were all strong factors in understanding wildness.

The artworks that were finally presented in the exhibition visually connected wildness with points of folklore and personal significance. Works were identifiable in the exhibition notes through referring to each participant by their first name, the place and in some cases a further explanation.

Mauri brought me to a large glacial rock on his land. Local mythology declares that on midsummer evenings it splits in half and the devil emerges from within. He told me about the seasons he has spent with the rock since he was a child, and I climbed up his handmade wooden ladder to inspect the rock itself and the view from the top. We made a video of him singing a folk song next to a campfire he lit under the rock

and the wooden ladder was later integrated into the exhibition presentation (see Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1 The Stone on Mauri's Land that Splits at Midsummer to Release the Devil

(Photograph by Mika RintaPorkkunen).

A picture showing a large rock in the middle of a forest with a ladder leaning against it.

Sanna led me through a forest to a cave where she revealed that she had located the site of a seventeenth-century hiding place for persecuted witches. It had taken her a long time to research and pinpoint from various historical sources, but she now leads participants in communal drumming workshops there. We made a video where she animated the space, also lighting a fire, burning incense, and playing drums.

Juha raced his motorbike around a motocross track that sat next to a sand quarry, adjoining his family farm. He pointed out many spots that he had spent time at as a teenager, all connected to times in the past where motorbike racing was an escape and a pastime. In many places, there were various pieces of junk, old car parts, and trash that had at some point been dumped in the landscape, all of which were slowly being overcome by nature. It had long been a place of freedom for him as a teenager. Alongside groups of friends they raced each other and worked on their motorbikes. For the exhibition, we made a video of Juha "flying" over some of the jumps and borrowed one of his motocross bikes as part of the installation.

Kirsi collaborated with her horse Nella in making a feathered costume. This costume, constructed from a long red banner of chicken feathers, was wrapped around the horse's belly and we made portraits of him in the forest. Later we strung the long line of feathers between two trees at Läntineva, near Ylistaro, a peat swamp near to where Kirsi had previously lived. The swamp had been a site rich in bird life and Kirsi

had ridden there often. Since it has been drained and the forest cut in order to be used by a power company, most of the birdlife is now absent. The act of hanging the feathered red ribbon marked her experience of the loss of this environment and the birds that had lived there.

Mannar and Tuomas took me to the art centre in nearby Lapua. The centre contains a theatre, library, museum, and gallery space and is built on the site of an old ammunition factory. Their family stories about visiting the centre and the history of how it had transformed the site gave rise to a family portrait, taken in the museum, using costumes, and an old painted photographic studio backdrop.

On Miri's farm were many small ponds on which she set sail tiny birchbark boats, constructions that she had learned to make as a child. We discussed her childhood memories and made a video as she set the boats afloat, while she was wearing a mask, also fashioned from birchbark. In the video Miri does not speak, but is re-performing the playfulness of childhood in the forest, a nostalgia for chance and possibility.

Laure guided me to Lauttajärvi, near Ilmajoki, the site of a lake that was unsuccessfully drained some decades ago. This partial drainage has resulted in a landscape that remains an open space with a surface that ripples and undulates when you walk on it. Laure's nostalgia for motorbike riding and walking through this scenery from his childhood was re-performed by jumping from a ladder into the ground with rubber boots on, and watching the ripples dissipate through the surface grasses and reeds.

A bird-watching tower on the outskirts of Seinäjoki was a site for Maryna. An immigrant to Seinäjoki, over years the tower had become a meditative site for her to return to again and again. The strong impressions of nature and solitude were

important to Maryna and our collaboration focused on the tower as a site of reflection for her. We literally represented this contemplative process with an image of Maryna holding a mirror in the landscape, framing the tower itself.

There were many more special places and conversations had over the course of the project. Each participant carefully and graciously uncovered points and places of wildness through conversations and discussions as we worked towards the exhibition. As already noted, universal commonalities emerged through the discussions and collaborations, with regular themes returning in participant's responses, including childhood nostalgia, family memories, sites where adrenaline is experienced, and a sense of connection to certain features in the landscape.

The second part of the project was a collaboration with the Seinäjoki Museums. In the same way that I had asked the individual participants in the project to consider what a psychological approach to wildness might mean to them, I asked the museum to consider their own collection from this curatorial perspective. From this starting point we discussed a range of items that might be possible to include in the exhibition. These included archive images as well as artefacts relating to natural history, agricultural history, and local landmarks. In the end we included a number of stuffed animals, handmade tools, and other implements relating to farming and fire fighting.

Thirdly, the collaboration involved the Laitakaupungin Orkesteri (LKO), a group of professional musicians based in Seinäjoki. I had asked them to consider wildness from their perspective as professional musicians. Together with some field recordings of my own, each member of the LKO contributed new tracks to the resultant soundscape. We worked on producing an LP over the course of the year, and the final recording included the traditional Finnish instrument kantele and vocals

that imitated traditional Finnish cow calls. This recording was the soundscape present in the exhibition, as well as being an LP published on the Sibelius Academy Folk Label.

The fourth element of the exhibition came directly from my own artistic response to working with this material from participants, the Museum, and the LKO. I included new “wildman” costume works as the idea of performing, or inhabiting, wildness is – from my artistic perspective – one way of making sense of it. I took up many of the motifs present in the rest of the show – acts of making fire, drumming, and walking all had their own wildman costumes. The installation and exhibition room itself could be read as a theatrical stage, including a soundscape. In this way the artistic material became animated and the sounds in the exhibition room provided a sense of movement and motion to the static presentation of artefacts and artwork. There was an interesting tension between the drama of these sounds and new costume works, its potential for fiction and the real places, spaces, experiences, objects, and historical artefacts that were presented in the show. In my own interpretation, this filled in the intangible quality that wildness has, a quality linked with experience, but also with dreams.

Visitors entered the exhibition hall and encountered the installation and sculptures all around them (see Figure 6.2). At certain points the soundscape rose and fell as they moved around the space. There was a lot of material present in the exhibition, collected from all of the participants, and although the exhibition guide provided a sense of order in what was present, there were many ways to experience the installation. The wildman figures could be seen as gatekeepers to the installation, but as you re-experienced them or passed them on your way out of the show, you might also notice that they are responses to other material in the exhibition. There was no

chronology or hierarchy of value to the objects, images, and videos that were presented; rather, they were arranged through aesthetic and visual logics. In some parts of the exhibition the lighting was particularly strong, giving shadows and depth to the works and objects and emphasising performative and theatrical narratives.

Figure 6.2 *Wildness Makes This World*, Exhibition View, 2021 (Photograph by Jenni Latva).

A picture of the *Wildness Makes the World* exhibition showing some of the artwork including costumes and photography.

In the past, my collaborative practice has been with experts and special practitioners of folklore and with historical museums. However, in this project I opened up this way of working to a collaborative and participatory practice, with people from many backgrounds, including the Laitakaupungin Orkesteri orchestra and the Seinäjoki Museums. With this way of collaborating, exploring, and understanding the place in which I was working, the Kunsthalle itself also became a key partner in mediating translation and practical support for the project. Their role was crucial as they introduced me as an artist and utilised their networks in order to invite people from their region to participate. Also essential was their support with the added pressure of the pandemic year in 2020. They helped to manage photographers and videographers to work with me from a distance, as it was not possible for me to travel from Berlin until it was time for the final installation.

Wildness Makes This World also influenced the Kunsthalle itself to reflect on its own wildness of place. In the catalogue, director Sanna Karimäki-Nuutinen considered the site of the exhibition, the institution itself, in terms of its own wildness and its place as a site of power (Cowan et al., [2020](#)). Quoting the Finnish Nigerian writer Minna Salami's book *Sensuous Knowledge* (2021), she placed the institution in a

framework of power that branches out from a core, a central wild point from which influence can spring. This balancing point between nature and culture is where the opportunity to influence and provide agency emerges. It places people at the centre of the institution and reflects the idea that people *are* the wildness.

As Sanna also points out, the exhibition presented a selection of places that dealt with continuity – places that were far off in time or isolated, and yet were always there. This is a mode of wildness that can be accessed again and again like a wellspring. It is clear that many participants in the exhibition returned to strong memories related to place and experiences from their past, even from childhood, that for them related to wildness. On reflection this should not have been a surprising discovery. I had thought that the experience of wildness would be something that brings a sense of the here and now for people, that experiencing wildness would connect people to place, and connect them to themselves. This was certainly the case, but it also has had the effect of becoming deeply rooted in memories of these experiences.

This quality of nostalgia for wildness is something that I think is at the heart of the reasons for the recurring annual calendar of folk traditions that sparked my questioning of wildness in the first place. Having the chance to invoke, repeat, and replay the experience on a regular, annual, community-based cycle not only reinforces connections to place and community but also reinforces the fact that wildness is a necessary and fruitful element of such rituals and celebrations. The exhibition suggests that even on a personal level wildness is an essential element of rejuvenation. It seems that the urge to discover and experience aspects of wildness is almost innate for humans.

Nearly everyone would have found material in this exhibition that would resonate with them as an understanding of what wildness could be. My role as an artist has been to present the material as an exhibition – placing objects, artefacts images, and other elements together to experience them as a set of examined, considered, and remembered materials. It was important to be able to give the opportunity to audiences to understand all of these sensory points of view aesthetically, in the same room at the same time.

Despite the intangibility of the wildness at the heart of the exhibition, *Wildness Makes This World* did not attempt to define wildness; rather, it suggested that knowing wildness when you experience it is part of human experiences such as childhood nostalgia, family memories, and sites where adrenaline is provoked. The folklore that develops alongside these experiences of wildness has deeply personal links to place and community and helps to reinforce the experience of wildness as a state of being.

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Image credits:

Figure 6.1 The Stone on Mauri's Land that Splits at Midsummer to Release the Devil
(Photograph by Mika RintaPorkkunen).

Figure 6.2 Wildness Makes This World, Exhibition View, 2021 (Photograph by Jenni
Latva).