FOLKLORE AS WONDER

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or, Speculative Methods and Artistic Transformations of Folk Customs across Gallery and Museum Practice



This text is the written component of a doctoral project, accompanying four exhibition projects.

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ABSTRACT

This practice-led research considers the material and conceptual shifts that occur when particular European folk customs are recontextualised within a contemporary art framework. Drawing on my experience of English morris dancing and mummers' plays, alongside engagements with German Strawbear (*Strohbär*) and May man (*Maimann*) traditions, I examine how folklore moves beyond documentary formats into a site of speculative enquiry. By developing an alternative form of documentation that values artistic ways of presenting reality, my practice formulates folklore as an extra-ordinary mode of artistic thinking defined by strangeness, mystery, and wonder.

Methodologically, I employ an intentional strategy of speculative wonder, pseudo-ethnography, and dialogical aesthetics. Taking a dual position as both a folk insider and an artistic outsider, I prioritise creative imagination over quantitative recording. Through a series of polyphonic conversations with artists, practitioners, and other experts, I produced a central archive of handkerchief masks alongside costumed sculptures, masks, and re-staged archive objects acting as untrustworthy artefacts in exhibition contexts.

My artistic practice encompassed four major exhibition installations bridging contemporary galleries and historical museums: *Wandle auf Rosen und Vergissmeinnicht / Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots* (Braunschweiges Landesmuseum, Germany), *para field notes* (Photographic Gallery Hippolyte, Finland), *The Scream of the Strawbear* (Kunsthalle Gießen and Oberhessisches Museum, Germany), and *Wildness Makes This World* (Kunsthalle Seinäjoki, Finland). In these, I examined institutional translocation through artistic interventions in museum collections and spaces, creating a state of bi-textuality where museum objects are re-enchanted in art settings while my artworks interrogate historical modes of display. These threshold sites are reconfigured as heterotopias where daily temporal and spatial rules are suspended.

The key outcome of my research is the formulation of *folklore-as-artwork*, a speculative vocabulary of folklore as vernacular and

residual culture, topsy-turvy logic, and the carnivalesque. Centred on figures like the *Wildman*, my work demonstrates how ritualised humour, parody, and defamiliarisation unpack societal hierarchies and cultural memory. By interrogating the aesthetics of folk authenticity, I offer a critical model for re-engaging with the human need for communal ritual and re-enchanted wonder.

Keywords: Artistic research, Contemporary art, Folklore-as-artwork, Museum interventions, Institutional translocation, Carnivalesque, Wildman, Speculative practice

KANSANPERINNE IHMEENÄ

eli spekulatiiviset työmenetelmät ja kansanperinteen taiteellinen muuntuminen galleria- ja museoympäristöjen välillä

Matthew Cowan

Tiivistelmä

Tässä taiteellisessa tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan sitä, millaisia aineellisia ja käsitteellisiä muutoksia tiettyjen eurooppalaisia kansantapojen uudelleenkontekstualisointi nykytaiteen puitteissa saa aikaan. Työssä hyödynnän omia kokemuksiani englantilaisesta *morris*-tanssista ja *mummer's play*-näytelmäperinteestä sekä kohtaamisiani saksalaisten *Strohbär*- ja *Maimann*-perinteiden kanssa. Niiden valossa tutkin, kuinka kansanperinne siirtyy dokumentoidusta muodosta spekulatiivisen tarkastelun alueelle. Kehittämällä vaihtoehtoisen tavan dokumentoida kansanperinnettä, joka arvostaa taiteellisia tapoja kuvata todellisuutta, muotoilen taiteellisessa työssäni kansanperinteestä poikkeuksellisen taiteellisen ajattelun muodon, jonka määrittäviä piirteitä ovat outous, mystisyys ja ihmettely.

Tutkimusmetodiksi olen valinnut spekulatiiviseen ihmettelyyn, näennäisetnografiaan ja dialogiseen estetiikkaan pohjautuvan tarkoituksellisen strategian. Koska tutkin asiaa kahdessa eri roolissa – sekä kansaan kuuluvana sisäpiiriläisenä että ulkopuolisena taiteellisena tarkkailijana –, asetan luovan mielikuvituksen kvantitatiivisen kirjaamisen edelle. Taiteilijoiden, taiteenharjoittajien ja muiden asiantuntijoiden kanssa käymieni moniäänisten keskustelujen pohjalta tuotin keskeisen arkiston nenäliinamaskeja ja niiden rinnalle puvustettuja veistoksia, maskeja sekä uusiin ympäristöihin tuotuja arkistoesineitä, jotka toimivat näyttelykonteksteissa epäluotettavina artefakteina.

Taiteellinen työni käsitti seuraavat neljä suurta näyttelyinstallaatiota, jotka toimivat siltoina nykytaiteen gallerioiden ja historiallisten museoiden välillä: *Wandle auf Rosen und Vergissmeinnicht* / *Walk on*

Roses and Forget-me-nots (saksalainen Braunschweiges Landesmuseum), *para field notes* (Valokuvagalleria Hippolyte), *The Scream of the Strawbear* (saksalainen Kunsthalle Gießen and Oberhessisches Museum) ja *Wildness Makes This World* (Seinäjoen taidehalli). Niissä tutkin institutionaalista translokaatiota museokokoelmissa ja eri tiloissa toteuttamieni taiteellisten interventioiden kautta. Sain näin luotua kahden eri tekstuaalisuuden tiloja, joissa taideympäristö antaa uutta lumoa museoesineille, kun taas taideteokseni tutkiskelevat historiallisia tapoja esitellä esineitä. Nämä rajatilapaikat järjestyvät uudelleen heterotopioiksi, joissa jokapäiväiset aikaa ja paikkaa koskevat säännöt lakkaavat hetkeksi pätemästä.

Tutkimustyöni keskeisin tulos on käsitteen *kansanperinne taideteoksena* luominen. Se tarkoittaa kansanperinteen spekulatiivisen sanaston tarkastelua kansan- ja jäännöskulttuurin, nurinkurisen logiikan ja karnevalismin muotona. Villimiehen kaltaisiin hahmoihin keskittyvä työni osoittaa, miten ritualisoitunut huumori, parodia ja vieraannuttaminen purkavat yhteiskunnallisia hierarkioita ja kulttuurista muistia. Tutkimalla kansan aitouden estetiikkaa tarjoan kriittisen mallin, jonka avulla on jälleen mahdollista tavoittaa inhimillinen tarve olla osana yhteisöllisiä rituaaleja ja lumoutua ihmeistä.

Avainsanat: taiteellinen tutkimus, nykytaide, kansanperinne taideteoksena, museointerventiot, institutionaalinen translokaatio, karnevalismi, villimies, spekulatiiviset työmenetelmät

FOLKLORE SOM FÖRUNDRAN,
eller: Spekulativa metoder och konstnärliga omvandlingar av folkliga traditioner i galleri- och museikontexter

Matthew Cowan

Abstrakt

Denna praktikbaserade forskning undersöker de materiella och konceptuella förändringar som sker när utvalda europeiska folktraditioner omplaceras och ges en ny kontext inom samtidskonsten. Med utgångspunkt i mina erfarenheter av engelsk morrisdans och mummerspel samt mina kontakter med de tyska traditionerna kring Strawbear (*Strohbär*) och May Man (*Maimann*) (Strohbär) undersöker jag hur folklore kan överskrida dokumentära former och bli en arena för spekulativt utforskande. Genom att utveckla en alternativ form av dokumentation som värdesätter konstnärliga sätt att gestalta verkligheten, utforskar jag folklore som ett extraordinärt sätt att tänka konstnärligt, präglat av främmandegörande, mystik och förundran.

Metodologiskt utgår jag från en medveten strategi som bygger på spekulativ förundran, pseudoetnografi och dialogisk estetik. Genom att inta en dubbel position, med förankring i folktraditionen och ett utifrånperspektiv på konstvärlden, prioriterar jag den kreativa fantasin framför kvantitativa mätningar. Utifrån en serie mångstämmiga samtal med konstnärer, utövare och andra experter har jag byggt upp ett arkiv med näsduksmasker, kompletterat med kostymerade skulpturer, masker och omgestaltade arkivföremål som i utställningssammanhang fungerar som tvetydiga artefakter.

Min konstnärliga verksamhet omfattade fyra större utställningsinstallationer som presenterades i såväl samtida konstgallerier som historiska museer: *Wandle auf Rosen und Vergissmeinnicht/Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots* (Braunschweiges Landesmuseum, Tyskland), *para field notes* (Fotografiska galleriet Hippolyte, Finland), *The*

Scream of the Strawbear (Kunsthalle Gießen och Oberhessisches Museum, Tyskland), och *Wildness Makes This World* (Kunsthalle Seinäjoki, Finland). I dessa verk har jag undersökt institutionell omplacering genom konstnärliga ingrepp i museisamlingar och utställningsrum. På så sätt uppstår en dubbel kontext där museiföremålen återfår något av sin magi i ett konstnärligt sammanhang, samtidigt som mina verk ifrågasätter historiska utställningsformer. Dessa liminala utrymmen omformas till heterotopier där vardagens tidsliga och rumsliga ordning sätts ur spel.

Det viktigaste resultatet av min forskning är utvecklingen av begreppet *folklore-as-artwork* (folklore som konstverk) – ett spekulativt ramverk som betraktar folklore genom folklig och kvarlevande kultur, omvänd logik och det karnevalistiska. Med utgångspunkt i gestalter som Vildmannen visar mitt arbete hur ritualiserad humor, parodi och främmandegörande kan synliggöra samhälleliga hierarkier och kulturellt minne. Genom att granska föreställningar om folklig autenticitet presenterar jag en kritisk modell för att återupptäcka människans behov av gemensamma ritualer och en förnyad känsla av förundran.

Nyckelord: Konstnärlig forskning, samtidskonst, folklore som konstverk, museiinterventioner, institutionell omplacering, det karnevalistiska, vildmannen, spekulativ praktik

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FOREWORD

I was a morris dancer before I was an artist, and an artist before I became an artist-researcher. This project, which has unfolded over a decade, has twisted and turned through a period of artistic production and writing, resulting in four large exhibition projects and finally this thesis as reflections on artistic engagements with folklore. The field of study deals with the question of how to approach folklore as a contemporary artist practicing in specific European contexts today. While folklore is a broad field, my approach is artistic, which means that I focus on some particular elements and motifs that align with my creative practice and inform my thinking. As a result, this text offers artistic reflections grounded in my personal experience with these particular folk traditions.

My practice has been an evolving and collaborative process, bringing me into partnership with traditional folklore practitioners, art institutions, and museums in Britain and Europe. This process has taken place through a series of exchanges across folk and artistic settings, making use of dialogue and documentary practices that allow for the integration of truth and fictional narratives into the overall presentation. This engagement has allowed me to explore how artistic transformation can occur within the field, working on exhibition projects in galleries and museums, but also through the informal exchanges that have taken place across pubs, homes, online meetings, studios, gardens, kitchens, and seminar rooms. I want to address the expressive forms, sense of performance, and humour at the heart of folk traditions, as these are qualities that I try to reflect on and re-imagine in my own work.

Folklore has an inherent possibility of imagining other worlds, times, and places that stems from the persistence of traditions and customs carried out in contemporary settings, but there are many other extra-ordinary aspects too. The experience of folklore with which I have been engaged, both personally and through the collaborations undertaken as part of this research project, is socially and community focused. My position as both a participant in folklore, with insider knowledge, and as an active member of the contemporary art world allows me, to some extent, to traverse both domains. This dual positioning has also shaped how I collaborate with communities, folk performance groups, institutions, and other artists in order to broaden the scope of what is possible, while engaging a wide range of participants in the work.

* * *

In presenting this folklore-as-artwork, where engagement with folk tradition is re-contextualised within a new, art-specific framework, the structures of artistic research provide a means to question and speculate, creating a space where the disciplinary boundaries between contemporary art and folklore overlap. In beginning this, my aim was that it would help me to develop the vocabulary to articulate this practice more clearly. It feels like this has been the case, while also recognising that an exhibition setting is also a way of articulating the questioning practice that artistic research requires.

By focusing on the strangeness of folklore – that is, the qualities that make up its extra-ordinariness – and a sense of wonder, the research has evolved into an artistic vocabulary for engaging with particular aspects. This thesis and the accompanying exhibitions are by no means a definitive study of folklore and its artistic connotations, but rather a reflective process of making sense of my own art practice, presented as an arrangement of artistic documents. These have taken the form of four exhibition installations, productive conversations with other expert contributors, and the written text that constitutes this thesis. Each of these reflective processes contains a dialogue that navigates elements of folklore's strange wonder as artistic research.

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28 May 2016–14 February 2017

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para field notes
Photographic Gallery Hippolyte,
6 April–27 April, 2018

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The Scream of the Strawbear
Kunsthalle Gießen and Oberhessisches Museum, Giessen,
7 September–17 November 2019

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Kunsthalle Seinäjoki, Seinäjoki,
9 December 2020–6 March 2021

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INTRODUCTION

As an introduction to this research, before moving towards the strategies of my own artistic interventions, I want to start with a quality of folklore that continues to interest me: its inherent extra-ordinariness. This introduction therefore begins by unpacking the core sensations of strangeness and wonder that underpin this extra-ordinary quality in folklore before outlining how these sensations are translated into research and the studio, the gallery, and the museum. This structure, which sets out these theoretical definitions, leads to a final introductory section in the form of a "glossary" of my own exhibitions. Overall, this is an introduction that tries to establish the logic of enquiry that underpins the research project as a whole, as a reflective, artistic experiment.

Strange wonder and research

The strange denotes that which is unusual, surprising, and unfamiliar or out of the ordinary.[1] I could also add to these a sense of the odd, outstanding, or peculiar. Strangeness as extra-ordinariness – that is, things that are strange because they are unusual or special – is one of the defining qualities of folklore as a human phenomenon. These characteristics of folk-strangeness occur through traditional rituals or customs as a process of experiencing things that have been knowingly made unusual or extraordinary by their participants, revealing themselves as distinctive from everyday life.

Strangeness is also sometimes due to the practical or symbolic shift of a folk tradition as the original purpose of a ritual act becomes less relevant through the passing of time, despite the form of the ritual remaining.[2] This is a specific kind of characteristic of traditional folklore that occurs in a contemporary world, bringing historical practices, props, costumes, and actions to a modern setting. Understanding both of these kinds of folk-strangeness and the ways that they transpire is part of the artistic process that I am engaged in, as I question and reflect on aesthetic and cultural expressions along the way.

Initially, I found it difficult to arrive at the terms to describe what I felt to be the clear central appeal of my relationship to folklore; that is, something that seems striking as a spectacle, but that also holds a mysterious quality at its heart. It is my feeling that strangeness is neutral in general because it has no inherently positive or negative connotation. Instead, it refers to a sense of unfamiliarity or an unusual circumstance, but it can be





1 | Exhibition view of *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Gießen in 2019.

instrumentalised as a way of othering – designating something that deviates from the norm. Although this term strangeness has many other connotations, I have used it here in this study in the sense of extra-ordinariness.

This sense of the unusual and the celebration of difference is a recurring motif in my works. It occurs through the instrumentalisation of the figure of the stranger and the powerful emblems that a stranger celebrates in folklore – that of renewal, disruption, otherness, and the unknown. Folklore and traditional rituals that celebrate these qualities as a necessary and elementary factor in their undertakings on a collective and community level are often my starting points for artistic reflection and practice.

Throughout this research, the importance of the figure of the Wildman to my practice has become apparent. As a central figure of traditions such the Strawbear (*Strohbär*) and May Man (*Maimann*) in Germany, the Burryman and the Jack in the Green in the United Kingdom, and many more folk devils and wild beasts in their annual appearances in carnivals and calendar rituals throughout Europe, the Wildman brings a sense of focus, danger, chaos, and joyous unpredictability to community events.[3] The aesthetic features of these Wildman traditions are reference points for the costumes that are one focus of the artistic presentations in this research. These costumes and disguises are the key to the symbolic visual focus of the figure's ritual function as a *strange visitor*.

In Georg Simmel's 1908 discussion of the figure of the stranger, the spatial dimensions of the stranger's relationship to what is common are a focus, but what becomes clear is the possibility of the positive influence that interactions with the stranger can bring.[4] The stranger is defined by a specific tension in that they are near in a spatial sense but distant in their social relation. In Wildman rituals, the costume, often composed of organic and tactile materials, serves as the boundary that mediates this tension. It transforms a member of the community into the strange visitor, creating a newness that Simmel identifies as essential for collective growth. In these kinds of rituals, the folk-strangeness is an intentional and operational function of the ritual structure, a formal state of temporary alterity that allows someone to perform as a stranger in their own community. In other words, there is something to be gained from an encounter with the stranger, as an engagement with the uncommon and the unexpected, and as an element of continuing to define and grow what the community is.

Consequently, one way of understanding the strange character of folk traditions is to view them as more than ordinary acts of remembrance or celebration; they are living phenomena that reconnect communities to mystery, past events, and agency that lie beyond the visible world. Many folk rituals revel in these moments, where for both participants and spectators, the normal order of things is intentionally breached. These ritual celebrations, which can be festive or formal (or a combination of both) evoke the strange in various modes. They also often bring elements of the weird, eerie, and uncanny (to which I will return in chapter 3), transforming the familiar into a state that reveals hidden implications within the everyday.[5] In this way, folk rituals continue to provide encounters with the strange, challenging our sense of reality and affirming the vitality of these unusual situations in people's lives. What makes folklore's strangeness so interesting is that it represents a deliberate form of human expression and celebration. When we find something strange, we are in fact encountering an especially distinct mode of human interaction.

One historic sense of strangeness defined it as an *interjection of wonder*, denoting its connection to surprise and the unexpected.[6] If strangeness begins to hint at the unfamiliar within some folk traditions, then wonder is both an emotional and rational response. Wonder can contain extremes of *marvel and dread*,[7] but as historian Marina Warner highlights, it has a dual meaning in conveying "the active motion towards experience and the passive stance of enrapturement".[8] In this way, the state of wonder can be both the sense of experience as well as an emotional desire to understand or prompt curiosity when faced with something surprising or extraordinary. Wonder then begins to form a name for the process of how I have come to address folklore in an artistic sense, as wondering is closely related to imagining, speculating, and questioning, the aspects of artistic research that I most identify with.

Francis Bacon, as the originator of the scientific method in the seventeenth century, characterised wonder as a form of *broken knowledge* – something that remains inherently incomplete and demands the skill of enquiry to be made whole.[9] During the Renaissance, the act of compiling a *Wunderkammer*, or a cabinet of curiosities, was a way of trying to create a complete scientific catalogue of the world, with the scientific method serving as the primary mode of enquiry. Objects of wonder in the cabinet were intended to represent small elements of a larger system of understanding.

However, from an artistic point of view, there is obvious value in taking the opposite standpoint; that is, that artistic wonder is an important element in the construction of knowledge, but is equally at the heart of creative work and a goal *in itself*.

Here, I have drawn on philosopher Mary-Jane Rubenstein's conception of "strange wonder",[10] which positions wonder as a dynamic and productive methodology for speculative artistic research. While classical philosophy treats wonder as a gap in understanding that requires a movement towards a resolution, Rubenstein characterises strange wonder as an active and open stance that looks at the extraordinary within everyday objects and rituals. This approach can sit with ongoing mystery and transformation, and produces imagination and speculation, and creative possibility. Strange wonder is then a very recognisable quality for artists because of the strange, mysterious, and wondrous qualities that the best art can have. It is the state that precedes the process of coming to know something, in a space that revels in the emotional state of amazement or doubt.

Strange wonder in this context becomes an active and deconstructive tool of defamiliarisation in my artistic process. My artistic position as a researcher is to manoeuvre myself as a participant and collaborator in an exchange that can directly connect with the intentionally special and extra-ordinary modes of folklore, in order to look again, re-enchant, and re-engage. Wonder can then be repurposed from the historical connotations it holds as a tool for a detached and marginalising aesthetic gaze, and as something that pushes the unfamiliar into the realms of the exotic. It becomes instead a central operation in the production of the work, employed as a practice-led methodology that makes intentional use of fiction and institutional translocation. It serves as a central motivating force for an artistic and reflective engagement with community practices, lived traditions, and the role that folk rituals play in contemporary life, as often wonder is the very quality that draws people together as both participants and spectators of folk rituals and traditions.

It is possible to view an encounter with the extra-ordinary quality of folklore as a staged process. Strangeness is a quality that folklore inhabits and celebrates and instrumentalises; wonder follows, as a viewer or participant encounters the experience of folklore; before a kind of estrangement or defamiliarisation can lead to a resolution and reflection on what has happened. This defamiliarising

experience is something that can occur in both folklore and visual art, although the way that it occurs is different in each field. The experience of observing a historic *Strawbear* ritual in a village in Germany, for instance, is anachronistic because the costume seems historical but the setting contemporary. The estrangement comes from a temporal dislocation, creating a sense of being pulled out of the present moment. The effect of the costume is to clearly mark the "wild" *Strawbear* as something extra-ordinary that separates observers from costumed performer, as part of the ritual. In the setting of contemporary art, estrangement has a further particular definition where a sense of spatial and conceptual dislocation can arise. Through the use of formal artistic language in a gallery or institutional setting, the conditions for a viewer to engage with artworks from a critical distance are created, offering the chance to reflect and process the works.

Because art can instrumentalise both fiction and factual reality, processes that are produced by wonder in an art context include speculation and the production of imagination. This kind of productive reflection is one of the processes that can hold real value in artistic research, as imagining other worlds and possibilities is one way of building on what we already know. Primarily though, my own experience of what artistic research is, comes down to reflecting on what has happened and re-folding those thoughts into imagining future practice. The imagination is the productive result. Taking time to make sense of the practice of making artistic research through other modes, including conversation with others and writing texts has also become valuable, as it allows me to understand the parallel creative practices of others, and to place my own work in a wider field of practice and speculation.



2| Strawbear (*Strohbär*) procession in Königsberg in 2019.

My exhibitions for this project have straddled both art and museum institutions, and at times the artistic practice has crossed over into curatorial practice, as I include objects from museum collections and other artistic and community practitioners in the works as collaborators. This in turn involves a series of collective interactions that take place both before and after the presentation of the artworks. This reflective questioning of what has happened in order to better understand what might happen next are anchored in the process of creating exhibition installations as the central experience of my practice in folklore.

Thinking through the handkerchief: The structure and the research question

Essentially, this doctoral project is projected between the two fields of folklore and contemporary art practice. While both fields are distinct, rich, and diverse established disciplines with their own systems of research and practice, the points at which they intersect are often misunderstood or only passingly referenced by practitioners in both fields. As the discipline dealing with folklore, ethnographic studies developed out of a focus on documenting and analysing folk customs as historical and contemporary data, and contemporary art sometimes seems to treat folk motifs as aesthetic readymades, but as artistic research, this project develops a methodology for studying how the considered material transformation of particular folk customs can produce new forms of artistic knowledge.

As a central question, it asks:
How can the artistic transformation of particular European folk traditions form a site for speculative enquiry and produce new artistic knowledge and reflections?

The research works through this question across the contexts of the studio, gallery, and museum, while reflecting on the sites, communities, and histories involved. Consequently, the reader can understand this text as a connection between artistic practice and written reflections, where both elements hold value and agency in the overall process. These two modes of enquiry have shaped one another over the course of the project, refolding themselves into the process in the cycle of artistic production and writing.

In the studio, the work is intuitive, drawing on the logic of the topsy-turvy, physical limitations, and domestic and readily available materials to engage the creative friction of the exhibitions. In the text, this material energy is brought into dialogue with a theoretical framework as a more reflective and questioning process. Through these dual modes, I have learned that moments of studio wonder are themselves productive sites of knowledge, as is the experience of completing an exhibition and re-evaluating what has been produced in the documentation and conversations that come out of each project. For the reader, there is therefore a dual performance to navigate, where the text and the artworks operate together, each offering a lens through which to explore the limits of translation and the possibilities of the folk imaginary.

This enquiry unfolds through six distinct, but overlapping movements across the following chapters:

I. Topsy turvy logic and untrustworthy objects:
Defining a methodology in research and studio practice that generates imagination and speculation, in ways that can work with others to produce artworks and reflections that deal with fictional and historic documents of folklore.

II. The artist is not quite an ethnographer:
How can I balance the roles of an insider and an outsider in this practice to navigate the ethics of the pseudo-ethnological and deal with what might be perceived as authentic in folklore?

III. They do this every year:
A discussion of the qualities and characteristics of folklore, such as the solidarity generated through the annual repetition of seasonal calendar customs and how these establish a non-linear connection to place and community.

IV. Performing humour and the art-folk-comic puzzle:
The kinds of humour that are generated by folklore have specific contexts in which they are received, but how do these particular qualities of humour become transformed when they are presented as evidence within a gallery setting?

V. "In comes I…" and the carnivalesque aftereffect:
The carnivalesque offers a mirrored world that can help to make

sense of folk rituals, but how does this extensive upside-down model function as artwork?

VI. Licking the glass case:
Artistic interventions in historical folklore collections can disrupt the usual chronology and hierarchy of museum systems, but what is learned through the process of transforming collections' creative technologies?

The challenge of this text part of my thesis has been to translate into written language the concepts and broader field behind the artistic practice I am engaged in. Through an artistic research lens, this is an exchange between thinking through artworks and thinking through written language. Both modes have strengths and limitations, but written language has an ability to engage in a reflective narrative as a consideration of the questions and knowledge gained through the making of artworks.

This process of questioning has been central to the conversational track of my research practice, which has taken place across a series of meetings with other artists, researchers, curators, folklore practitioners, and museum professionals. A record of these meetings appears in this text as selected quotations drawn from the transcripts of exchanges in various settings, such as studios, pubs, houses, and gardens. As well as these selected elements of conversation as quotations in this text, there are a collection of masks constructed from handkerchiefs and made as a productive tangent of each conversation.[11] These handkerchiefs as a motif return me to the original form of folk dance I learned, even before I was an artist: morris dancing. At least in the Cotswold tradition, morris dancing is performed with either a stick or handkerchiefs, and sometimes both. The handkerchief is flicked and waved as part of the choreography of the dance. As masks though, they function here more as a reference to the artistic research I have been engaged in and its delight in disguise and the craft of folklore. They are tangible as creative and productive artefacts, revealing something in parallel to the conversations themselves.

Artistic transitions

Conceptualising folklore as an anti-world mirror realm
In this project, I have taken "folklore" as the term to describe the various and particular traditions and community practices that I have

focused on. It is the term that feels the most familiar to my experience as a morris dancer who learned about British "folk" traditions in Aotearoa New Zealand and made an important early step as an artist at the English Folk Dance and Song Society in London. As an overarching term it is familiar to me in representing a shared human cultural architecture across many contexts, but the field has diverse approaches across the places in which I have engaged my practice, and in each there are highly diverse and specific folk practices.

Folklore means one thing in English, and even has specific implications in an academic sense, but across disciplines and in different countries it does not engender the same central understanding. In Finland, there are oral traditions that are studied under the discipline or field of *folkloristiikka* and material cultures that come under *etnologia*. In Germany, the seemingly parallel term *Volkskunde* carries a completely different weight and is a now largely outdated term that has been replaced by various ethnographic disciplines. But, as terms that feel close and familiar to me as an artist and as a practitioner, *folk*, *folklore*, *ritual*, *tradition*, and *custom* are used in this text as the main terms of reference to the field I am engaged in.

In general, folklore studies spans a formal field of study that developed from an original focus on European traditional cultures to cover a wide range of study in many contexts around the world. Folklore encompasses phenomena that belong to either verbal, material, or customary lore with many sub-groupings and differentiations amongst these categories. According to the Folklore Society in London, which was founded in late-nineteenth-century London as other academic disciplines of cultural study were developing, a current definition of folklore is "the overarching concept that holds together a number of aspects of vernacular culture and cultural traditions, and is also the name of the discipline which studies them". The society then goes on to note that their "interest and expertise covers such topics as traditional music, song, dance and drama, narrative, arts and crafts, customs and belief", but they "are also interested in popular religion, traditional and regional food, folk medicine, children's folklore, traditional sayings, proverbs, rhymes and jingles".[12]

The American Folklore Society describes a similarly wide range of cultural phenomena in its understanding of folklore, including things that may or may not be related to truth.[13] Importantly, though, they understand folklore as "a central every-day part of life

and how we make sense of the world today"; that is, it is not simply an association with outdatedness or *pastness* (my term).[14] This un-relationship of folklore to conventional historical truth or proven evidence is also a fundamental element of its nature as a contemporary phenomenon. If we think of "folk medicine", for example, the word "folk" itself suggests something of supposedly lower status or at least unproven in a scientific sense. This understanding of folklore includes things that might have another kind of truth to established norms or offer practices that have been passed down through families and communities as alternatives.

According to the *Handbook of Folklore* (1914), the term "folklore" was first credited to W. J. Thorns, who had used it in 1846 as he was looking to replace the earlier term "popular antiquities". That handbook further defined folklore as "the learning of the people", emphasising collective wisdom and cultural expressions that are passed down through generations.[15] Seen in this light, folklore is situated as a living tradition and is rooted in people's everyday experiences and practices. It is a way of structuring understanding of communal knowledge and identity.

Over time, the concept of folklore drew both interest and criticism, eventually developing into a partially academic field. It is often associated with the traditions, ancient customs, and survival of festivals, myths, legends, and proverbs that are thought of as remnants of a characteristic pastness. It might sometimes seem that folklore is now only things that are actually collected and placed in museums – stripped of their original vitality and embeddedness in community life.[16] This might then mean that folklore is marginalised as outdated or unscientific, even as it continues to offer cultural meaning and a sense of continuity with the past. But folklore can also be contemporary and modern in its roots and communities and there are still many healthy folk cultures and traditions in various contemporary contexts across European settings. It is in this ongoing contemporary performed folklore that my interest lies, connecting communities and building the present with historical ties to the past.

As both the English name for the academic discipline and the activity, folklore lies at a meeting point of insider practice and academic observation, between its original function and its interpreted meaning. It inhabits a mode of otherness that connects to the promise of an alternative to established scientific and academic modes, seemingly offering a genuine view of the world that lives in past

connections to nature and agriculture. This tradition creates the idea of an "anti-world" that has survived the onset of modernism and technology.[17] The development of an understanding of what folklore is and its place in society throughout the twentieth century and up to the present has taken place in the context of vast technological and cultural developments that can represent the uncertainty of breaks from the past.[18] We sometimes experience folklore today through a postmodern suspicion of its meta-narrative, often allowing it to return in fragmented ways, recontextualised for tourism, television, and advertising. The idea of folklore, however, orients itself towards the recovery of the essence of what has been lost in this process of modernisation,[19] only adding to the romanticism and nostalgia that surrounds its appeal.

In this relationship between folklore and modernity, however, a kind of ambiguity developed around its authenticity. If folklore was an anti-modern authenticity which belonged to the past and represented tradition that was almost lost, it is only through the development of the modern academic disciplines of folklore and its wider disseminations in culture that it can be thought to be recovered, understood, and remediated.[20] But this formal academicisation of folklore as a discipline and wider academic cultural studies came to a point in the 1980s where many researchers felt that a more inclusive and diverse approach to what constituted folklore was required,[21] a discussion that in many respects is still unfolding today.

This ambiguity, particularly in Britain, also houses a class shift that occurred over the course of the twentieth-century folk revival. The shift in morris dances and mummers' plays from being mainly activities of seasonal agricultural workers to becoming primarily middle-class social pursuits shows how this has played out. Despite this class transition, from rural working-class origins to urban middle-class settings, and from informal, uncategorised practices to academically studied ones, authenticity remains present in both stages. This kind of authenticity is rooted in the shared intention, social cohesion, and unity of purpose that bring these kinds of folklore events to life, and not necessarily loyalty to strict reproductions of past practices and performances.

However, these forms of participation in the performance and rituals of traditional folklore are an important part of defining what makes it meaningful to people. Its position in the margins, as an alternative to mainstream culture and a way of understanding

the world is part of what makes it unique and important. Writing on the persistence of historical forms within modern life, cultural theorist Raymond Williams conceptualises these peripheral practices as "residual culture", while also reinforcing the importance of things that have gone before:

> The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process – not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation.[22]

His description of aspects of culture that are left over from the past, but constitutive of the present, is revealing in the way that these parts of culture are necessary and elemental, even when in the periphery. Folklore is something that is lived and practiced as an important and vital element of contemporary life outside of mainstream cultural practices.

While this thesis focuses primarily on specific residual traditions and folk contexts within Britain, Germany, and Finland, across Europe there remains a hugely diverse landscape of folk cultures practiced in entirely distinct ways, bringing together communities around various essential customs. What folklore actually means to these groups and the individuals within them can vary significantly, shifting even within the very local setting where a ritual occurs, let alone across the wider regions and countries in which they take place. While folklore as a discipline recognises tradition as a fluid, shifting phenomenon reshaped to meet contemporary needs, those who participate in these practices are often seeking a sense of historical validity to feel a connection to their heritage. Navigating these divergent perspectives among participants, researchers, and observers is an ongoing process, central to understanding how folklore functions as a contemporary, meaningful practice.

If folklore was an intimate other to modernity and academia,[23] then it must also be considered a mirror realm to contemporary art practice as folklore's implications of authenticity are key to what makes it a field of interest, and not only for artist researchers. Folklore can seem authentic in ways that many kinds ofcontemporary artistic practice do not. Its connections to pastness, its

collectively created forms, its valued focus on tradition, and its occupations with the immaterial and community all contrast with contemporary art practices that prioritise originality, materiality, and newness, practices that can sometimes be viewed as suspicious because of their connections to neo-liberal social orders, funding systems, and the commercial art world.[24] Yet, in her critical history of folklore studies, Regina Bendix warns that authenticity itself can sometimes be a modernist construct that can brand folklore as something essentially untouchable and beyond critical interrogation.[25] Folklore is many evolving things though and to avoid characterising it as a static relic, it is important to focus on folklore as a living socio-cultural practice. The relationship between folklore and the everyday is a cycle of exchange, offering a set of values and cultural practices, with seasonal rituals, festivals, and social practices providing the active stage for their expression and performance. When these communal customs are perceived to be authentic, they carry a significant emotional weight, helping to solidify a group identity and draw a community closer together. The sense of authenticity might then come from long histories of communal engagement and the relationship between tradition and evolving cultural needs.

As becomes clear, however, when you scratch the surface of the history of folk tradition, what is authentic and what is not quickly becomes a complicated and twisted story. From the point of view of research, then, a search for authenticity in folklore is hardly going to be an easy or even particularly useful task. But the perception of authenticity remains as a central and communal driver for people to participate in folklore and come together around shared and reiterated traditions. And from an artistic point of view, observing this kind of impetus to commune around a meaningful folk custom is a particularly magnetic quality that becomes interesting when examined through art practice. A true fantasy of folklore is that somewhere in old traditions and customs is an uncorrupted, genuine core of human connection.

Folklore still contains essential elements of creativity through processes that are formed over time and through communities of many un-named practitioners. As Peter Harrop and Steve Roud point out in *The Routledge Companion to English Folk Performance*, “just because there is already something to perform, imaginative and talented people do not stop making new work”.[26] The mediation of folklore as it is presented in museums, documentary practices, and in the general understanding of people builds

a picture of many aspects of folk customs and the celebration of folklore as a deep-seated human need. Folk celebration takes many and varied forms in serving a fundamental community rationale,[27] marking out points on the calendar, moments in human lives, and celebrations of community and place as universal subjects of commemoration. Viewed from this perspective, there is no question as to why folklore exists – it is a human need – and it follows that it flows into the spaces in human societies where it is required.

Folklore-as-artwork

I have come to realise that the "as" in this project is the point on which much of the work has turned. It is a small preposition that acts to bring together two things in a logic that one is "like" the other. Thus, for most of this text, I am using the term folklore-as-artwork, in the sense that some element of folklore is acting like artwork. Unlike the "as" of a simile, which only compares, what is interesting is *how* that folklore actually becomes artwork and also what parts of it are still folklore and what parts of it are art.

There are points in this project where I have been an *artist-as-folklorist*, and many when I consider *folklore-as-artwork*, and in these terms I am exploring how one thing takes on the disguise, costume function, or qualities of another, without fully becoming it in a fixed sense. The "as" creates a space of fluidity and possibility, where roles and objects are relational and performative. This creates a dialogue between folklore, history, and artistic practice, incorporating elements of documentation and fictional narratives, as well as borrowing concepts from other fields like anthropology and museology. As a ready-made, folklore becomes re-examined and shifted towards something else. Artwork that includes folklore often both historicises and repositions it for a contemporary audience and its presentation in an art setting signals a different set of rules from that of documentation or the museum. It can be presented as possibly fictional or yet possibly authentic as a kind of speculative staging, emphasising and even celebrating the question of what is authentic in folklore.

My understanding of this relationship deepened when I worked with my friend Stewart Morgan Hajdukiewicz on his 2019 documentary film *All My Life's Buried Here: The Story of George Butterworth*. My role was to play the English composer, folk song collector, and morris dancer (**Img. 3**), requiring me to step into

intertwined roles as creator, researcher, and performer. My scenes were mainly morris dancing or walking through countryside on the way to collect folk songs. For this, I grew my moustache in the style of Butterworth, and with Hajdukiewicz, I tried to put together a costume that approximated what the collector might have worn. Through this experience, I realised that playing the part of a folk song collector had a resonance for what I am doing as an artist. Adopting the role of folklorist – as an artist – implies stepping into a form of questioning and gathering cultural narratives, filtered through an artistic lens, that allows for interpretation, invention, and critique.

This impulse to treat folklore as a living creative methodology mirrors a broader lineage in modern art history. A major 2020 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou-Metz, titled *Folklore*, mapped out this history. The show framed a generation of artists, stretching back to Wassily Kandinsky in the early twentieth century, whose work intersected with that of folklorists and collectors. It highlighted artists, such as Susan Hiller, who were crossing into anthropological territories and were taking on roles beyond what was considered as mainstream artistic practice. Underlining that there were significant overlapping tendencies across art practices and folk traditions, the exhibition showed how artists have continually been involved in the repositioning of folklore from a historicised phenomenon to a contemporary one. As the curators outline in the exhibition text, this interdisciplinary lineage demonstrates how artists do not simply document folklore but actively reanimate it as a dynamic territory for speculative creative practice.[28]

In a wider sense, the interplay of roles that contemporary artists take on are extensive and varied. In *The Artist As Producer, Quarry, Thread, Director, Writer, Orchestrator, Ethnographer, Choreographer, Poet, Archivist, Forger, Curator, and Many Other Things First,* a 2018 volume of essays that supports the numerous roles that artists inhabit, it becomes clear that operating in what contributor Elizabeth Freeman calls “temporal drag” opens up spaces where new perspectives can unfold.[29] Through the shifting of artistic positions, the boundaries between the disciplines of art and folklore, and between artefacts and artworks, can become more fluid, opening up new artistic freedoms, but also responsibilities for artistic practice. These shifts can be captured by the multiple forms of “as” that are traversed in this project:

– **Folklore-as-artwork**
The shifting of folk elements (rituals, props, or costumes) into an art context where they act like artwork, signalling a change from social/communal function to observation and reflection. There is also a shadow implication: it is also possible to produce (fictional) *artwork-as-folklore.*

– **Folklore-as-spectacle**
Viewing rituals through their visual, material, and sensory impact rather than their historical or practical utility.

– **Artist-as-folklorist**
Adopting the role of a collector or questioner to gather cultural narratives, which are then filtered through an artistic lens for invention or critique.

– **Artist-as-ethnographer**
An engaged, subjective mode of practice that borrows the tools of anthropology (fieldwork, recording) to prioritise aesthetic experience over scientific data.

– **Artist-as-outsider**
Utilising the perspective of a stranger or "double agent" to gain access to hidden museum spaces or to view local traditions with a critical distance.

The key translocations of folklore-as-artwork

Folklore stretches across a spectrum from the universal to the highly particular,[30] and in bringing it to an art context, the particularity is what first interests me. I have been especially drawn to the kinds of folklore that are performed and their particular active functions for communities and performers. This performance mode of folklore contrasts with the experience of viewing artworks that are sited in galleries and museums, primarily as spaces for observation and contemplation. With this in mind, across both exhibitions and text, my artistic approach to folklore makes use of both folklore as readymade artefacts, or pre-existing cultural objects, as well as fictional artefacts, newly invented or reimagined artistically. These differences work towards a kind of artistic mode where the emphasis falls on artistic truth rather than a focus on historical accuracy.

Rather than documenting folklore as heritage or fact, I am interested in how it can be examined and activated through art as a kind of questioning and speculation of its place in the world. My aim is to make use of this dual modality, integrating artefacts and new original works together as a kind of aesthetic truth embedded in its lived and enacted practices.

While folklore is traditionally a social, communal practice rooted in lived experience and tradition, its presentation as artwork inevitably changes the experience of its meaning. In the translocation from its original community setting into the specialised frameworks of contemporary art and historical museums there is a conceptual and semiotic shift. The above multiples of *folklore-as* are the performative strategies and fluid spaces for this research, but the following translocations represent the productive and conceptual consequences of these strategies of moving folklore physically and semiotically across institutional thresholds. They map the specific shifts in meaning that occur when folklore is filtered through the artistic *as*, moving it from a state of lived tradition into a state of speculative enquiry.

In this project, the transition unfolds in three main ways:

– **From social function to critical observation**

In its original context, folk ritual serves a community rationale, such as marking the calendar or ensuring luck through particular acts in specific locations. When placed in a gallery, this immediate social and utilitarian function is withdrawn. The meaning shifts from a practical performative act to an object of observation, where the perspective is of conceptual or critical significance rather than a local or community connection.

– **From authenticity to speculation**

Folklore is often framed as if it were holding up a fantasy reflection of an authentic past. By reframing traditions through parallel fictional and collaborative practices, the work introduces a productive *untrustworthiness*. The meaning is altered from a heritage record towards a site of speculative enquiry, where the boundaries between truth and invention overlap.

– **The artistic doubling of the object**

By moving objects between historical museums and contemporary galleries, the research also creates a “bi-textuality” where an

object is able to perform two roles at the same time. A museum artefact in a gallery is stripped of its prescribed historical truth and re-enchanted through artistic conditions, while original artworks in the museum ask questions about the nature of the artefacts they are placed next to.

Underlying all of these transformations is the question of how the artistic processes involved can formulate a new kind of artistic knowledge. Valuing the kinds of sense and nonsense of folklore and the chance to look again through artistic settings can create a generative force for understanding the place of traditional folk cultures in the contemporary world.

The contextual frameworks

Critical artistic brokerage

In the early stages of my doctoral project, I began by defining my practice as largely interested in much smaller-scale traditions and rituals, the kinds that can almost operate at a domestic and hyper-local scale. I assumed that I would be investigating the links of traditions to places, the thoughts of practitioners on their participation, and the kinds of annual customs and rituals that can take place in small communities. My exhibition *The Scream of the Strawbear*, at Kunsthalle Giessen in 2019, did revolve around these themes, and I return to it regularly in this text. Working with communities and documenting the process (through artefacts, exhibitions, and conversations) has enriched the research and shown how engagement with practitioners has been a central mode of practice in my work.

Along the way, I have also realised that the political dimensions of this work are not insignificant. Because this practice does not really fall into the kind of socially engaged "activist" practices that are working with clearly defined political goals in mind, I didn't immediately recognise the nature of the politics of engaging with the communities involved. It has been an important step to recognise these key elements of community involvement in folklore as political, as well as the connections between the specific cultural practices and the places they occur, while unpacking ideas around artistic appropriation. While these exchanges can intersect with wider discussions around postcolonial theory and the vital ongoing re-evaluation of colonial histories, it is important to note that my creative practice locates its expression outside a

formal postcolonial framework. Instead, the work operates within an exchange of aesthetic material and intuitive terrain, focusing closely on the specific, local dynamics of these particular folk contexts as they take place across Britain, Germany, and Finland. This recognition has helped me to contextualise the political dimensions in my practice in a way that celebrates social and individual identity as a unique and particular aspect of life, inherently connected to its time and place.

Folklore is a social and cultural field in which many overlapping localities, communities, disciplines, individuals, experts, and artists practice. This in turn means that the materials of my artistic research are likewise socially and culturally signified and therefore require an ethics of care and consideration when working with them in an art context. Sensitive questions of representation or appropriation arise when exhibitions present folklore-as-artwork, and so it is important to consider how an artistic mode of practice might respond. Growing up in Aotearoa New Zealand and later understanding my place as a Pākehā artist has meant learning to view the world with an awareness of indigenous Māori perspectives, recognising that land, ancestry, and the spirit of place are sacred, living realities. This has instilled a fundamental respect for the integrity of indigenous connections to heritage, necessitating a constant self-awareness about where my own voice belongs and how it can best contribute. As a Pākehā artist now based in Berlin, in the middle of Europe, with a German family, my own English and Scottish ancestral heritage is all part of the framework for this research. An appreciation of this spirit of place, and an understanding of how communities connect to the expression of their identities through seasonal relationships with memory, has remained central to my overall research approach.

A discussion of some of these issues unfolds in the following chapters, but essentially my own position comes down to a practice of brokerage through questioning, learning, and exchanging ideas with the collaborators and participants of the folklore that I am working with. Sometimes, knowing when and how to artistically recognise and reference participants comes best from simply asking directly how they wish to be included, and other times it is important to fully think through the context of the presentation. The considered framing of these contextual details signal to an audience in turn that the works have been made with an engaged and collaborative approach.

This kind of artistic point of view takes folklore as both a subject and a method, emphasising its capacity to engage in the social and the political, but also importantly, material and sensory questions. When folklore is presented in a museum context, it can sometimes feel like a medium of preservation, engaging in what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has termed the "poetics of disappearance".[31] Instead, I try to find a way of looking at its strange and wondrous elements as a lens for critical reflection within our contemporary context. From this perspective, questions such as how disguise works in the aesthetics of folk costumes or how to engage fiction in the presentation of tradition are useful modes.

Using the language of contemporary art, this could initially be viewed as a socially engaged art practice, as it involves collective and social identity and makes links to ethnographic or anthropological traditions. However, while the four exhibition projects that are included in this thesis make use of some of the elements of a socially oriented practice, such as a collaborative and dialogic approach, each in their own way traces a path between a socially engaged model and a studio practice model. In this research, I have therefore reflected on how I have been able to work discursively and collaboratively, approaches central to art historian and theorist Grant Kester's concept of dialogical aesthetics,[32] while, in parallel, drawing on the imaginative and fictional practices I work with in the studio. This kind of intertwined and pluralistic mode positions me as both the author of fictional artefacts and a critical broker within a cultural and social dialogue with folklore.

Folk humour and the carnival

When folklore is brought into the field of art, the humour that folklore generates in its original setting is transferred to a very different framework. This is one part of the process of artistic re-negotiation that takes place in this new context. Folk objects such as costumes and masks carry humour that is often immediate, physical, and collectively understood in a performative sense, but as art, the humour acquires some distance in order to view it as art. This produces an array of comic reactions – sometimes becoming uncanny and estranged, or even misunderstood. The shift from lived communal experience to formal artistic display reframes the comic from something performed live to something observed as artefact or documentation. The eventual questions arise as to who is making the joke, and how is it functioning under the specific conditions of art?

From my own point of view, it is important to signify that these moments when folk humour is re-presented as art are not about bringing a sense of irony to folklore-as-artwork, but about valuing the peculiarity, strange wonder, and comic energy of folklore itself. This humour can lie in viewing elements of costumed transformation and disguise, but also in the ritualised pleasure of attempting, and often failing, to become something else. In a gallery, comic features can appear either strange or serious, or sometimes both at once. Following Henri Bergson's observation that comedy often arises when something does not fit within a given form,[33] folklore's outsider status as artwork can produce comic elements in its aesthetic presentation. Depending on an art audience's expertise or point of view, humour can be interpreted on multiple layers, both in its potential to engage and its possibility to misdirect and produce a kind of comic awkwardness. For some, the pleasure of folk humour can come in recognising and in connecting with shared cultural knowledge, but for others, an encounter with the unfamiliar and the strange can produce a different kind of humour. In this project, the humour can be found in the performative and material tensions of the physical artworks themselves (though not necessarily in the reflections of this text) and in their arrangements as installations. Humour can be fragile in these kinds of artistic translations, it can fail to connect or end up alienating one audience, while at the same time it remains an essential element of transgressing broader cultural and social frameworks.

During my 2019 exhibition *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Gießen, a visitor left a critical note in the guestbook implying that bringing such folklore into a gallery was a sign of needing psychological support. While the remark was not exactly kind, it nevertheless touched on an essential characteristic of folklore, which is its tendency to operate within an unsettling, subconscious mode. By interpreting the presentation of these costumed figures as a direct psychological provocation, the comment serves as an unexpected confirmation of the disruptive, chaotic agency inherent to the carnivalesque.

As a theoretical viewpoint, the carnivalesque shows how symbolic inversions, temporary chaos, and shared laughter can become communal instruments for social critique and form new ways of seeing the world. It is also possible to extrapolate the carnivalesque as a speculative mode for artistic research, challenging conventional and methodical views of knowledge by embracing its

chaos and celebrating its failure and laughter as fertile ground for new ways of knowing. In a visual framework, this approach values embodied fragmentation and disorder, allowing knowledge to emerge from playful, topsy-turvy experimentation rather than linear reflection. But despite the potential of this mode, there still remains the realisation that exhibitions that operate in forms of the carnivalesque do not actually replicate the carnival itself. Inevitably they can only act as documents of its vitality, functioning as reflective spaces where the carnivalesque is observed, rather than participated in.

Framing the carnivalesque in art practice has both productive and problematic connotations. It is neither revolutionary, as it is sometimes claimed to be, nor does it deal with ordinary states of being. Rather, what it does allow is the asking of questions and the possibility to move the framing of the works to another realm of speculative possibility, to where the usual order of things is disrupted and inverted.

3| Playing the role of George Butterworth, morris dancer and folk song collector, in *All My Life's Buried Here: The Story of George Butterworth*, Hajdukino Productions (2019).

Fiction in the museum

In each artistic presentation for this doctoral research, there has been a collaboration with a historical museum collection. Accessing and engaging with folklore artefacts in these historic collections has been an important step in the development of the exhibitions, integrating both historical artefacts and the lens of the museum as an institution, into the final installations. Exhibitions took place across both historical museums and contemporary art institutions and negotiating the specific conditions and unique possibilities of siting works in these spaces has been a major element of the research. Unlike contemporary artworks though, which operate on the implication that they are newly ready to be presented, the museum artefacts I have made use of in this project have already survived and aged through time. They carry with them traces of their creation, use, and later institutionalisation. Consequently, I have used the term *artefact* to describe these kinds of objects, to emphasise their material and historical narrative. As curator James Putnam notes in *Art and Artifact*, the museum environment "fossilises" objects, stripping them of their original function and transforming them into historical data.[34] But in recognising this, there is also a chance to attempt to re-animate or subvert museum logic itself as a means of artistic production.

Museums are engaged with practices of classification and the establishment of definitive historical timelines. While this



is a valuable research practice in historical fields, it can sometimes overlook the dynamic nature of cultural phenomena like folklore. Recent museological practices, such as engaging artists to work with their collections, have become a way for museums to invite audiences to look at their collections from a different point of view. It creates a semantic charge, and something similar also takes place when museum objects are brought into art galleries. Across both artistic and museum spaces, this can be both an advantage and a challenge as the institutional framing can exaggerate artefacts and artworks in unexpected ways and there is artistic potential and risk in engaging with the inherent historical frameworks that a museum as an institution provides.

Over the course of this research, it has been useful to ask questions such as how artefacts were acquired, how they are or have been presented, and what ideology is foregrounded in this process? As anthropologist and curator Nicholas Thomas points out, museums are also founded on the premise of wanting to know,[35] and so it follows that asking questions is perhaps the most essential skill of artistic research in the museum. In my case, sensory skills, or testing the limits of the modes of display and presentation, have also become essential skills of artistic research. As speculative methodologies, creating alternative histories and imagining other kinds of narratives that are rooted in the nature of folklore, but are not necessarily bound by historical accuracy, have allowed for disrupting the standard methods of presenting folklore in the museum.

The particularities:

Glossary of key traditions and experiences mentioned in this text

Green Man Morris

My own early experience in the field of folk performance was learning to morris dance in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in the 1990s. I learned this English folk dance practice by joining Green Man Morris, a morris side performing mostly Cotswold morris dances and English mummers' plays, adding our own traditions to those that we knew and performing wherever we could.

The Byker Mummers

When I was living in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the 2000s, a group of artist friends and I started the Byker Mummers. At Christmas and sometimes in the summer, we toured the pubs of the Ouseburn Valley, performing mummers' plays along the way. Each year, our final performance was at the Cumberland Arms.

EFDSS residency

In 2009, I was the first artist in residence at the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), based at Cecil Sharp House in London. Over the course of the year, I curated a programme of exhibitions and events and presented a solo exhibition. For an artist, this position offered access to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and the archives of the EFDSS: more than a lifetime's material to work with. One curated exhibition, *Mumchance and Guise*, provided an opportunity for a selection of performance artists to make new works that could be performed at Cecil Sharp House around the time of Halloween, a tradition that has many variations in Britain. This Halloween performative tradition continued with a group of performance artists for a few years following the residency.

The Burryman

The Burryman is a traditional event that takes place in South Queensferry, near Edinburgh in Scotland, every August. A man wearing a costume covered in prickly burrs makes a day-long procession around the town, stopping regularly at local houses and landmarks.

The *Strawbear*

A *Strawbear* is a traditional character that appears in carnival processions or seasonal customs in parts of Germany and elsewhere

in Europe, mainly during the winter. For the exhibition *The Scream of the Strawbear*, I worked with the Königsberg Traditionsverein and their *Strawbear (Strohbär*) procession. A *Strawbear* was also a character in the exhibition *Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots* at the Braunschweiges Landesmuseum.

The *May Man*

The *May Man (Maimann)* is a traditional character that appears as part of an annual procession in early summer in parts of the German state of Hessen. I worked with the volunteer fire services in Rittershausen and in Steinbrücken, who organised the May Man traditions in those towns, for the exhibition *The Scream of the Strawbear*.

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6 Etymonline, “Strange - Etymology, Origin & Meaning”, accessed 24 September 2025, https://www.etymonline.com/word/strange.
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8 Marina Warner, ed., *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment* (Vintage, 1996), 3.
9 Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder*, 23.
10 Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (Columbia University Press, 2012).
11 As a morris dancer, a handkerchief seemed like the perfect object to offer up for transformation into a mask.
12 The Folklore Society Website, accessed 11 June, 2021, https://www.folklore-society.com/about/.
13 American Folklore Society, “What Is Folklore?”, accessed 22 July 2023, https://whatisfolklore.org/.
14 American Folklore Society, “What Is Folklore?”.
15 Charlotte Sophia Burne and George Lawrence Gomme, *The Handbook of Folklore* (Sidgwich & Jackson for the Folk-lore Society, 1914), 1.
16 Edward Kasperski, “A Requiem for Folklore?: Myth, Truth, and Folklorism”, *Tekstualia* 1, no. 1 (2013): 231, https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0013.6145.
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19 Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1997). 8
20 Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 8.
21 Wes Hill, *How Folklore Shaped Modern Art: A Post-Critical History of Aesthetics*, Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies 15 (Routledge, 2016), 142, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315679617.
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23 Dorothy Noyes, *Humble Theory: Folklore’s Grasp on Social Life* (Indiana University Press, 2016), 14.
24 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso Books, 2012), 12.
25 Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity*, 20.
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31 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Folklore’s Crisis”, *The Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 441 (1998): 300.
32 Grant H. Kester, ed., *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (University of California Press, 2013), 110.
33 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton, with Fred Rothwell (Martino Publishing, 2014), 112.
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CONVERSATION MASKS





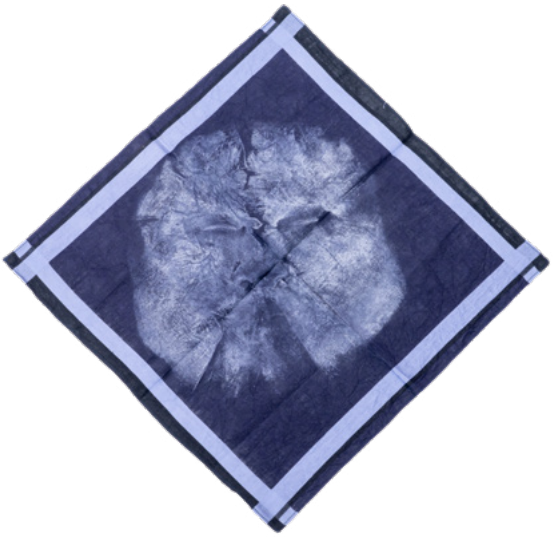
Tereza Buskova
Mariana Novotná





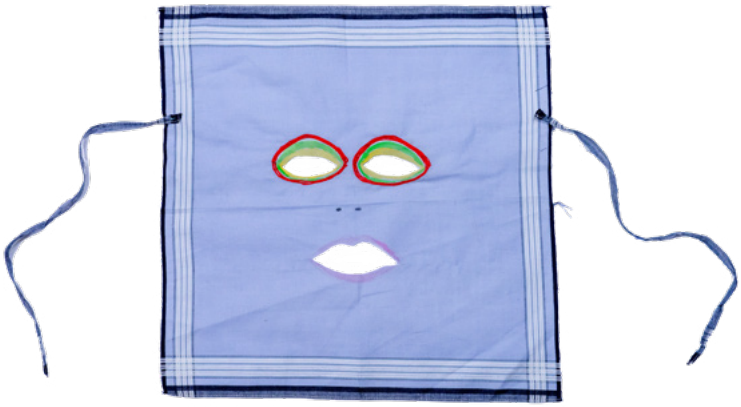
Bruce Asbestos
Kirsten Bernhardt







Faye Claridge
Simon Costin
Mellany Robinson





Jack Duplock
Rob Garret





Katri Hirvonen-Nurmi
Axel Hoedt



Minna Hokka









Alex Merry
Lally Macbeth
Chloe Metcalfe







Stewart Morgan Hajdukiewicz
Bruce E. Phillips



Lucy Wright

List of conversations held during this reseach
For each conversation, a mask was produced as a productive result of the discussions.

Bruce Asbestos:
English artist based in Nottingham.
Conversation held at the Keane's Head Pub, Nottingham, on 20 May 2019.
bruceasbestos.info

Kirsten Bernhardt:
German museum consultant and folklorist based in Münster.
We worked together on the exhibition *Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots* in 2016. Conversation held in the storage rooms of the folklore collections of the Braunschweiges Landesmusum on 9 March 2019.

Tereza Bušková and Mariana Novotná:
Czech collaborators Tereza Bušková, an artist based in Birmingham, and Mariana Novotná, a costume designer based in Prague.
Conversation held by Zoom from my Berlin studio on 12 October 2022.
terezabuskova.com

Faye Claridge:
English artist based in Warwickshire.
Conversation held by Zoom from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland on 1 February 2023.
fayeclaridge.co.uk

Simon Costin & Mellany Robinson:
English director and curator of the Museum of British Folklore, a roaming project-based museum.
Conversation held at Cullins Yard, Dover, on 16 December 2022.
museumofbritishfolklore.com

Jack Duplock:
English painter, based in Stroud.
Conversation held in his studio in South London on 18 May 2019.
jackduplock.co.uk

Rob Garret:
New Zealand artist and teacher based in Gdansk.
Conversation held by Zoom from my Berlin studio on 13 October 2022.

Katri Hirvonen-Nurmi:
Finnish Museum Director and researcher based in Helsinki.
Conversation held at the Helinä Rautavaara Ethnographic Museum on 23 November 2022.

Axel Hoedt:
German artist and photographer based in London.
Conversation held by Zoom from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland on 4 February 2023.
axelhoedt.com

Minna Hokka:
Finnish traditional instrument maker and musician based in Turku.
Conversation held by Zoom from my Berlin studio on 9 December 2022.
www.minnahokka.com

Lally Macbeth:
English artist and founder of the "Folk Archive" and "Stone Club", based in Penryn, Cornwall.
Conversation held by Zoom from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland on 13 January 2023.
lallymacbeth.org

Alex Merry:
English folk dancer and artist, and founding member of the women's morris dancing team, Boss Morris, based in Stroud.
Conversation held in her mother's garden on 19 May 2019.
alexmerryart.com

Chloe Metcalfe:
English traditional dance researcher based in Stony Stratford.
Conversation held in her lounge and at her costume archive on 15 December 2022.

Stewart Morgan Hajdukiewicz:
English documentary film maker based in London.
Conversation held at the Film Archive, London, on 18 May 2019.
hajdukino.com

Bruce E. Phillips:
New Zealand curator based in Scotland.
Conversation held by Zoom from my Berlin studio on 1 October 2022.
bruceephillips.com

Lucy Wright:
English artist and hedge morris dancer based in Micklefield, Yorkshire.
Conversation held at her house and studio on 14 December 2022.
www.lucywright.art

Note: As these conversations took place across a range of informal settings, including studios, pubs, gardens, and zoom calls, the quotations featured throughout this text have been edited for flow and clarity.

EXHIBITIONS

The exhibitions that make up this research

The exhibition projects for this doctoral research span the period from 2016 to 2021. During this time, I have worked with many small-scale groups of folk performers, enthusiasts, volunteers, and organisations. Alongside the support of the host institutions that presented these exhibitions as distinct sites of research, these exhibitions were situated in specific institutional and local circumstances, and it has been important to contextualise them within the broader cultural and artistic frameworks with which they engage. This emphasis on local specifics alongside wider themes mirrors the particular and the universal axes of folklore, untangling specific points of difference as strange and extra-ordinary – the aspects of the wonder at the heart of this artistic enquiry.

Wandle auf Rosen und Vergissmeinnicht / Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots
Braunschweiges Landesmuseum,
Germany, 28 May 2016–14 February 2017

This exhibition was the result of a year-long period of field-work in the Braunschweiges Landesmuseum. The show presented new works alongside objects from the museum's collection and was concerned with understandings of folklore and courtship. Objects were selected from the museum's folklore collection alongside new works that were created for the exhibition.

4–8| Exhibition views of *Wandle auf Rosen und Vergissmeinnicht / Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots* at Braunschweiges Landesmuseum in 2016.













para field notes
Photographic Gallery Hippolyte,
Helsinki, Finland, 6–27 April 2018

This exhibition took its title from “para”, the supernatural milk stealers of Nordic folklore. These mythological beings were present in folk beliefs predating the arrival of Christianity in Finland, and can be seen, depicted as devils, on the interior of the church at Kalanti, Southwest Finland. The exhibition deals with the presentation of some particular aspects of the folklore of the rural springtime, which is a time when animals are released into the open from barns and male snakes emerge from their winter subterranean hibernation. The exhibition was made with the collaboration of the Men’s Choir of Mynämäki, Minna Hokka, and the Tavastila Local Museum in the village of Mietoinen.

9–15| Exhibition views of *para field notes* at Photographic Gallery Hippolyte, Helsinki, in 2018. .




ELECTRIC FENCE
ELECTRIC FENCE






SÄHKÖ
HIEROMAKONE




CORRAL
SUPER
N 1100



The Scream of the Strawbear
Kunsthalle Gießen and the Oberhessisches Museum, Giessen, Germany, 7 September–17 November 2019

This exhibition presented a pseudo-ethnological investigation of wider cultural phenomena and folkloric motifs that span Giessen, Aotearoa New Zealand, and England. At its centre were the *Strawbear* and the *May Man*, two traditional seasonal rituals from the state of Hessen. The installation featured new artworks and videos alongside artefacts from the Oberhessisches Museum, exhibited across both venues. The exhibition was made in collaboration with David Barnes, Boss Morris, Dr. Ludwig Brake (Stadtarchiv Gießen), Prof. Dr. Siegfried Becker, Institut für Europäische Ethnologie / Kulturwissenschaft, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Freiwillige Feuerwehr Rittershausen, Freiwillige Feuerwehr Steinbrücken, Traditionsverein Königsberg, and Prof. Dr. Volker Wissemann of the Botanischen Gartens Gießen.

16–20| Exhibition views of *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Gießen and the Oberhessisches Museum in 2019.











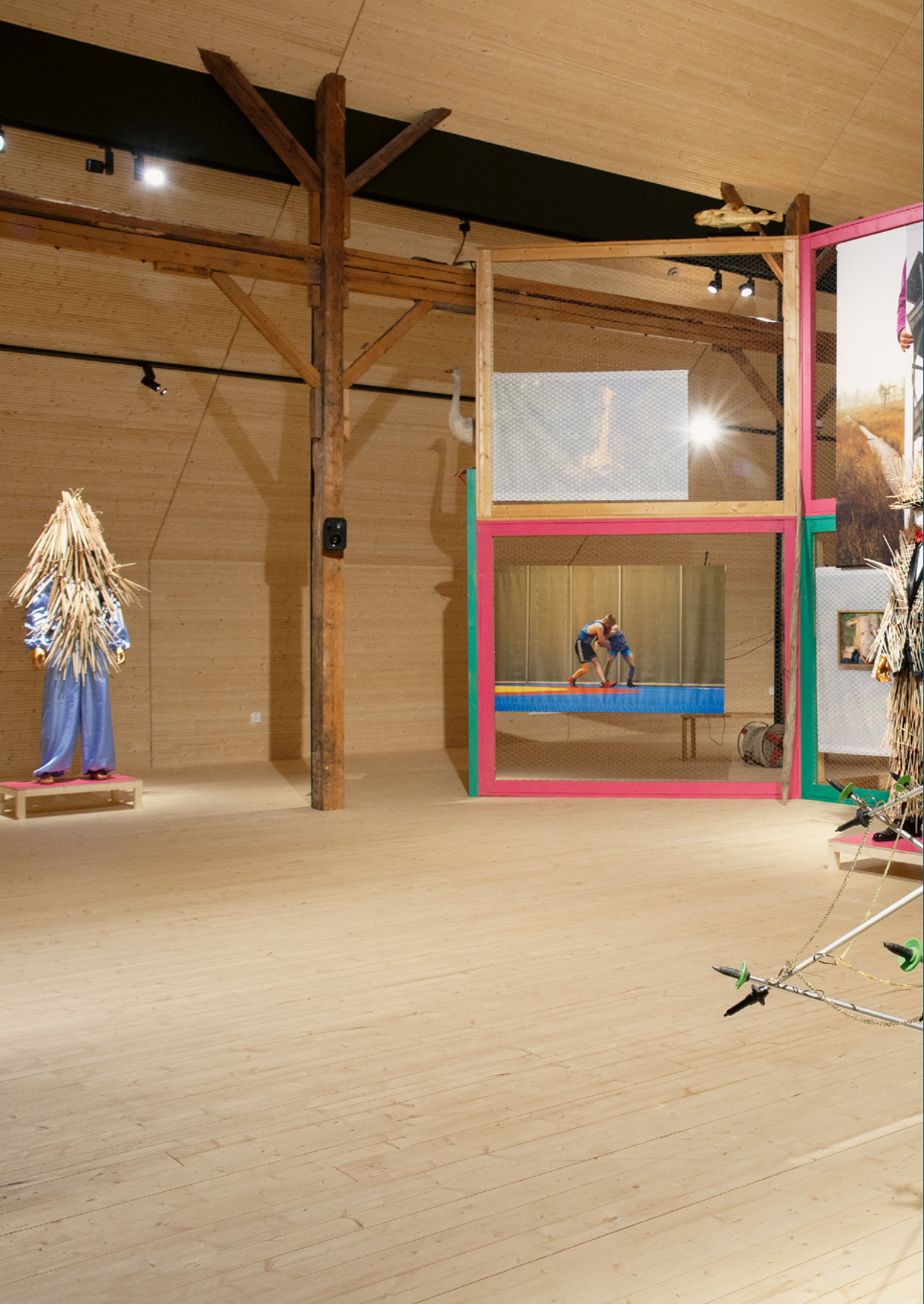


Wildness Makes This World
Kunsthalle Seinäjoki,
Seinäjoki, Finland, 9 December 2020–6 March 2021

21–26| Exhibition views of *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2021.

This exhibition was a participatory project involving people living in the area of Seinäjoki, the Seinajoki Museums, the Laitakaupungin Orkesteri, and Kunsthalle Seinäjoki that explored "wildness" as a mode of being. The exhibition was a collective installation of new artworks, artefacts, and historical objects as an examination of wildness, not just as it relates to nature, but more specifically as it relates to personal experiences and sense. Accordingly, acceptance of psycho-geographic knowing and the connection of experience to place was an important theme of the exhibition. The installation speculated that wildness is essential for living, something that we return to and re-perform in numerous ways that are sometimes unexpected and not always limited to natural worlds.






PLATINUM








Hard Rock

1.

TOPSY TURVY LOGIC AND UNTRUST-WORTHY OBJECTS


Herbarium Matthew Cowan
Scopolia carniolica Jacq.
Solanaceae
leg/det Volker Wissemann, 30.07.2019
Deutschland, Hessen, Gießen, Botanischer Garten der Justus-Liebig-Universität
Referenznummer: 0-U-2800

1.1 What research means in this project

1.1.1 Shifting from image to text

27| Exhibition view of *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Gießen in 2019, showing a detail of *Herbs*, 2019, herbarium samples, cardboard boxes, magnifying glasses.

At a point later than it should have been in this doctoral project, it dawned on me that I was conducting artistic research. This realisation has mainly been about a shifting of position, as I think about the processes at play in my artistic work and discuss them in person and in text. Defining artistic research has been a process that involves a slow-moving shift to understanding artworks in words, in a way that I haven't previously been familiar with. This testing and translating of ideas into words and texts has required that some new skills be learned, old ones be re-engaged, and studio practices be re-moulded. In practice, it reveals the need for thinking about the knowledge produced through the practice of making artworks as well as their context and the possibilities that they touch on, as speculation. The need to shift to thinking through the language of writing, alongside the "thinking in images"[36] that I am already familiar with has been a conscious swing in the process of the doctoral project. Personally, these are the clearest forms of identifying what might be a definition of artistic research.

Realising that I am engaging in artistic research has been a slow process of becoming aware of my relationship to a field that is at once familiar, but also foreign and challenging. In the past, I circled around the mysterious core of folk tradition in my practice, translating it into my own artworks. This thesis has been an attempt at understanding how the mystery, strangeness, and wonder that I experience in folklore can be formulated as artistic knowledge. It is a development that means that my practice has transitioned to no longer be that of an artist only, but also something else.

This elsewhere space is a flipside of the practice that continues to exist, only expressed in a different textual mode. By its nature, research seeks "the not-yet-accepted knowledge of a discipline",[37] and so feeling my way through a process of thinking artistically in text form is not instinctive. There comes to be a tension between what was created physically as artwork and what is written in text from. However, artworks in the light of artistic research can be something different – they can operate in other fields – and can be applied to different frameworks, such as research in folklore or museology, as evidence of understanding practices and processes.

My relationship to these works involves a split as both the author, but also as an interpreter and an arranger, who takes

the necessary distance in time and space in the practice of reflection. This shift in mode from artwork as statement to artwork as discursive mode enables a kind of practice that arranges works in a way that allows for multiple readings and outcomes. There is a requirement to organise my practice into the different roles, for which art historian and theorist Miwon Kwon suggests a variety of verbs, including "to negotiate, to coordinate, to compromise, to research",[38] and to which I would also add to converse and to imagine, amongst many others. Despite these new roles, however, I am firstly an artist with a studio practice where I work to produce exhibitions and artworks and I find this space critical, not just for practical reasons, but for understanding my own identity as an artist who makes things.

1.1.2 The research processes

The kinds of research processes that I am engaged in are:

Artistic: Creating and experimenting with artworks; video, sculpture, images, and installations and the practicalities of producing them. Developing an overall scheme or framework that the works can be presented in.

Collaborative: The processes of working with participants in folklore and other artists as well as institutions such as galleries and museums in order to produce artistic research and present exhibitions.

Curatorial: These collaborative and artistic processes overlap into the curatorial and the orchestration of the whole process of creating exhibitions. In practice, this means choosing not only objects from collections but also voices and performers in my exhibitions. It involves negotiations with institutions, research on objects and their histories, and aesthetic understandings of how objects and their presentation might work in artistic settings.

Reflective: It has been a productive experience to research contextually, understanding other artists and experts working in the field in order to situate my own practice in relation to what has happened previously and what is being undertaken now. Reflection is a process that operates cyclically and consciously, developing works from what has been learned and curiosity about how these insights can be used. It feeds naturally into the writing process.





28| Mariana Novotná with her *Conversation Mask*, 2023.

Annette Arlander's *Artistic Research and/as Interdisciplinarity* defines this kind of reflective practice as research that takes place through contextual writing *after* the artworks have been produced, a compliment to the artworks themselves.[39] This has also been the case in my doctoral project; however, it has also been the case the that reflective thinking has further contaminated the creative and practical aspects of the artistic process. It takes place between and even before the creation of new works, so that it would no longer be totally to correct to say that the reflection only takes place after the exhibition has been taken down, but that it is part of a cycle of working that involves different stages that are knotted together, intuitively looking forwards and backwards at the same time. As Michael Schwab points out, the processes of making and understanding in art are "always at play together".[40] In this sense, an artistic self-awareness is closest to refining the reflective process over the course of the body of work that has made up this project.

1.1.3 Conversation as a form

I felt strongly from the beginning of the research process that I would like to involve other voices in my text, and the process of talking to other practitioners, including artists, researchers, curators, folklore practitioners, and museum professionals, over the course of the project has been enlightening and strengthening to me as a researcher. Along the way, I have come into contact with a range of practices and expertise from many other contexts. I chose to take a dialogical approach, as it allows for multiple possible understandings on any particular theme. Some fragments of conversations quoted in this text, which explore folklore and contemporary art through discussing each other's practices in this way, have been useful in building a wider perspective on how to practice in this field and have helped to build the context for the artistic positions that I have taken. As well as these productive conversations, in each case, a mask has been produced as a result of the discussion we have had and these artefacts form their own discrete archive within the overall research process. They are tangible artistic evidence of the process of research, markers of time and place, but also of a person and their contributions. The diverse style of these masks also marks the form of the conversation that took place, sometimes referencing what was talked about or the materials that were at hand when we were speaking.

Conversation as form can unlock many fields of practice. Its dialogical nature means that ideas that are not yet fully formed are free to be tested, to grow, exchange, and expand.[41] The inclusion of different voices in this text, through fragments of conversations that open up the field to other angles and perspectives than my own, also serve as a counterpoint to the main threads of this written part of the thesis. The particular kinds of exchange involved discussions of the idea of folklore itself, some of the challenges involved in bringing these understandings into the artistic sphere, the role of museums, and many more reflections and jokes that never made it to these pages. Where possible, the conversations happened in person, in studios, pubs, houses, and gardens. When it was not possible to meet in person, because of the pandemic or simply the logistics of travel, we met online in a video call from studio to studio. For these calls, I made sure to post a handkerchief in advance, so that the process of mask making could begin during our talk. Most of these handkerchief masks were shown as an in-progress archive of this thesis in the exhibition *Claws and Connections – All the World's Senses*, which ran at KUVA Tila in Helsinki, from 1 to 25 February 2024.

1.1.4 Polyphony

These conversations bring a sense of polyphony, with many distinct voices contributing to the exchange in the making of this text, and this mix has shaped the wider discussion of practices and



29| Exhibition view of *Claws and Connections – All the World's Senses* group exhibition at KUVA Tila, Helsinki, in 2023, showing *Conversation Masks*, 2019–23, mixed media.

ideas. Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of polyphony as an approach to artistic thinking highlights how these voices can coexist within a literary or artistic setting, each keeping its own independence and value as a storyteller. Taken as a whole, the conversations that have contributed to this project create a shared polyphonic picture that reflects how different viewpoints connect and overlap within a larger, unified narrative. In an artistic field where folklore can be understood as a deeply ingrained communal expression, it is important to keep in mind that communication and dialogue between institutions, artists, and the communities they are working with are critical to the success of any project.[42] Conversation is a tool for facilitating any kind of productive progress, specifically because of how it is able to negotiate exchange and shared points of view and especially when conversations are managed in an open-ended and respectful way.

So, when reflecting on my practice, an understanding of the polyphonic allows for multiple parallel viewpoints. Bakhtin borrows the musical sense of the polyphonic,[43] where several melodies are interwoven to form a musical texture, and so within a visual art practice the polyphonic becomes a metaphorical technique for presenting diverse elements within a coexisting artistic whole. This can mean that different parts of an installation enter into dialogue with one another, making use of contrasting, independent materials and histories to shape the resulting whole.

In my practice, the polyphonic often emerges as a dialogue between documents of communal folklore I have worked with



30| Jack Duplock in his studio with his *Conversation Mask*, in progress, 2019.

in specific local contexts, objects from historic museum collections which I bring into installation practice, and the fictional practices I create in response to these exchanges. The in-between spaces of this dialogue are where I feel the works gain traction, seeking out an artistic truth of folklore that unfolds between community, history, and a creative documentary response. As the artist, I am able to orchestrate a dialogic field through the bringing together of artistic elements that build up a whole.

1.2 Productive strategies of the research

1.2.1 The production of imagination

At the heart of my own artistic practice is always the chance to imagine the fantastic possibilities that artworks can suggest, beyond the realm of the exhibition. In this sense, the artistic understanding does not reside in the artwork itself, but in its ability to generate speculative possibility. Kendall Walton uses the term "prompters" to describe artworks as mechanisms to begin imagination, in that they are mandated to allow fictional truths to develop.[44] This connection between artworks and imagination is at once familiar as a kind of playing. The fields of activation are between gallery and museum, cultural practice and imagination, art settings and the real world.

Early in the research process for this thesis, I came across Hayley Newman's three-volume doctoral thesis, "Locating Performance: Textual Identity and the Performative".[45] This work was a significant turning point in my thinking on artistic research, as it allowed me to realise that imagination and fiction can be at the centre of the instrumental nature of artistic research. Newman's thesis was as an interview between two of her selves – a form that immediately had a kind of imaginary scenario at the heart of it – held in a conversational tone that acknowledged the form itself. Reading the text has the strange effect of taking you out of the fiction of the interview form while at the same time anchoring you in it. In the thesis, the first Hayley asks which is the real voice in the conversation, to which the second Hayley replies: "Your voice is also my voice and so serves as a modus operandi allowing a flow of ideas to change direction and move laterally within the parameters of this text."[46]

Volume 3 of the doctoral thesis contains the series of works entitled *Connotations*, where Newman presents photographs of staged performance scenes. This includes *Crying Glasses 1995 (An aid to Melancholia)*,[47] an imagined performance from 1995 that

makes use of a mechanism in a pair of glasses that makes it look as if the user is crying whilst riding public transport (**Img. 31**), and *SMOKE, SMOKE, SMOKE,* an imagined work from 1998 where a choir smoked as a way of plotting the "tract of the voice".[48] These were accompanied by fictional text panels describing performances that did not exist, apart from their staging for photographs. These were not documentations of actual performative events as they were described but rather carefully constructed fictions. Notes in the thesis described the performances, dates, and places where they had taken place, including listing notable institutions and participants. These were works that dealt with the power of speculation and suggestion through a kind of deconstructed documentation. As artworks they were authentic and real, but the content dealt with fictional narratives and a questioning of what and where performance takes place.



31| Hayley Newman, *Crying Glasses (An Aid to Melancholia)*, 1995, black-and-white photograph.

These works reminded me of a series of exhibition posters by Jeremy Deller, exhibited by the Modern Institute in 1994.[49] This poster series was for imagined solo exhibitions by British pop culture figures such as a David Bowie, Keith Moon, and John Squire, presented as if they were being held at established art institutions, such as the British Museum in London or the Cornerhouse gallery in Manchester, with plausible details of opening times and exhibition durations (**Img. 32**). Looking back on these posters now, they seem like ephemera of almost plausible events. In both Newman's fictional performances and Deller's posters of speculative, fictional exhibitions, placing these imagined events not just at the heart of the works, but as the works themselves, invites an audience to participate in the generation of the meaning of the work as they imagine the event happening. The audience participates in the creative process in a kind of speculative collaboration with the artist's idea.



32| Jeremy Deller, Keith Moon: *A Retrospective*, 1995, silkscreen on paper.

At the conceptual heart of my project are the particular kinds of folklore that are performed with wildness and humour. It is now possible to recognise that as an artist, I might have the ability to produce artworks that use these concepts to engage in these by inviting speculative imagination. For example, the particular circumstance of an exhibition of artworks and museum objects is one that is able to deal with (the pursuit of) truth and fiction at the same time. The artworks and objects in the exhibition give their permission to, and mandate the *make believe* that is connected to, this co-arrangement of works.[50] Bringing attention to folk practices such as the *Strawbear* or the *May Man*, or a historical

understanding of *para* in an artistic setting allows for a different kind of thinking than what would be possible in a solely historical presentation because of the innate relationship to speculation that artistic practices can generate.

As English philosopher of art R. G. Collingwood articulates in his *Principles of Art* that "art is not indifferent to truth: it is essentially the pursuit of truth", identifying two kinds of artistic thinking: that which is "expressive" and that of "the intellect".[51] The tensions that exist between these two kinds of thinking are where problems and tensions arise, and consequently where a "pursuit of truth" can unfold. One key part of Collingwood's statement sticks out: that is, that art is the pursuit of truth, rather than a statement of truth, implies that truth itself might be artistically unknowable, or beyond the scope of ever being reached. He infers that art might be thought of as indifferent to truth because it deals with imagination and representation but distils the process of artmaking down to a quest for knowing. It might be that truth is not the only correct operative word here at all, as we could substitute observing, imagining, knowing, understanding, or recognition into the same sentence, reinforcing the process-based nature of artistic enquiry.

Matthew Cowan: *My question was about truth and how it is mediated in your form, because the source material also has difficulties in terms of truth. But what is the kind of truth that you are dealing with in your documentary?*

Stewart Morgan Hajdukiewicz: *Well, it's feelings actually…*

But that's one reason it's so difficult, or I find it so difficult, to do a documentary that works on an emotional level, which I think any good film has to. Otherwise, if you don't connect with it as a viewer on that level, then you don't connect. So you are constantly balancing the delivery of facts and information with the emotional truth. I mean, Herzog talks about the accountant's truth – the stats – and the ecstatic truth, or emotional truth. He would be prepared to script and set up scenes of his own invention in order to convey the emotional truth. I think we've done that in the film. You can zoom in however you want, but even by shooting reconstruction footage, we're not saying this is how it was. We're saying this is kind of how

it might have been. Or we're not even saying that at all. We're saying, we're just going to show you this, and you can make up your minds and feel what you feel. But we've done it in such a way that it works within the meaning of that sequence.

In my own practice, I lean towards the kind of connections that can take place when objects or installations at an exhibition are placed together, the acknowledgement of the kinds of exaggerations of scale and space that occur in exhibition making, and the extra-awareness of context involved in bringing such exhibitions to fruition. As Thomas observes, museum scenography is much more instrumental than simply displaying things, as it develops arguments through the arrangement of things.[52] My approach, therefore, is to embrace the tools of active arrangement (it is one of the most satisfying parts of the process in my experience), viewing the gallery space as a critical tool that allows the installation to articulate its own argument rather than presenting a collection of separate objects. The arrangement of objects in the exhibition then becomes a final level of presentation, developing the overall work's core ideas by carefully and deliberately working with the elements of scale and institutional space.

1.2.2 Folklore as artistic strategy

Adapting the qualities of folklore into contemporary art then involves a number of significant modifications. In gallery settings, the materials used in traditional customs and folk rituals rarely remain unchanged. While a contemporary art gallery or art museum is full of the traditions and customs of the artworld, it is not a genuine setting for folk traditions or customs and so at the very least folklore presented there is out of its context and re-mediated. Audiences of contemporary art approach these materials with a different mindset than participants in folk rituals, interpreting what they see based on a different kind of conceptual framework.

Tereza Bušková: *It's about people thinking about different and often hidden symbolism. When I was shooting [my film]* Masopust*, there was like a village party the day after the performance, and I sat at the table of the men who were perform-*

ing the rose ritual, which had the young men in the black suits and the rose hats. And, and I said to them, you know if you really kind of think about it, what are the roses symbolising?

*I know, like for you guys, they symbolise the flowers of the meadow and the red and white ribbon symbolised the sweat and blood of Jesus Christ. But have you thought about other symbolism, like the rose being a symbol of vagina? And they went, "No, that's not about that at all" [*laugh*]. They were really angry and embarrassed. I found it really interesting, and I thought, well, here you are performing this ritual every year at the same time, wearing the same traditional costume, but you don't perhaps ask questions. Why are you wearing it? What does it symbolise? What could it symbolise? I thought, okay, that's another interesting thing in my work: that I ask questions, and I want to then perhaps show these questions through visual symbols in the footage.*

Sometimes people [say], "You should have a description about what your work is about next to it, so we all understand." And I'm like, "No, I [shouldn't]. You can interpret it the way you want." I want people to not have a full understanding perhaps of what it's about. I want them to make their own interpretations. I'm interested in what feelings they will have while watching it.

It's like looking at old traditions and legends, like the Ride of the Kings, where this young boy rides through a village on a decorated horse in Moravia every year, and in his mouth he's got a rose, because he was supposed to be silent. In Masopust [2010, digital film]*, there's a shot of Zoe and Eliška having this rose in their mouth. Or in another film of mine,* Spring Equinox [2012, digital film]*, there's a shot of the male dancer having his face covered and whipping the water with the* pomlázka*, which is this phallic symbol, a ritualistic object which is used to whip, to wish them fertility and healthy lives. Again, often these rituals would be performed without thinking about them, in any other kind of way.*

When folklore is shown in an art context, it is inevitably viewed through a new lens – where viewers are seeking conceptual or

critical meaning rather than the social or historical and local connection of folk practices. A dialogue of citation between the disciplines of folklore and artistic practice and research often unfolds, using the language of documentation, fictional narratives, and borrowed conceptual frameworks such as anthropology and museology. However, in working with folklore, an alternative, transgressive sense is often already inherent in the subject matter and so the material already has a conceptual and physical *readymade-ness*. Because folklore is often perceived as inherently authentic, four overlapping categories emerge through which folklore-as-artwork can be viewed:

– **The readymade**, an object or artefact of a folk tradition or ritual that becomes an artwork by its artistic co-option as it is.
– **As documentation**, in artistic media that presents folklore as a document.
– **As artefact**, that is presented as if it were in a museum context, where the works are presented using the language of museum display.
– **Imagined folklore**, where a speculative or fictional version of folklore is presented.

Artwork that makes use of folklore as a ready-made (whether the artwork is in fact an actual ready-made, or the artist is using the language of the ready-made in creating fictional or pseudo-folkloric objects) in an art setting, mirrors the setting of a museum as it is seldom or never actually unfolding in the gallery or art context itself. There has been a change in context that is not simply about the mechanics of the ready-made art object but also involves bringing in the historical contexts of the museum. As a result, the transformation of folk rituals into ready-made artworks is not just a matter of physical relocation but also of conceptual reframing.

Another way of looking at this mode of artwork is to think that it functions as documentation. That is, the artwork is a document of something that has already happened in another time or place. This language of documentation and artefact is quite often the framework in which an artist presents folklore in contemporary art, as it is a familiar and understandable form in which to frame it. If artworks traditionally position themselves not as reality, but as signifiers removed from reality,[53] then the language of documentation attempts to bring back the narrative of authenticity so inherent in folklore's understanding.

This presentation often produces work that contains a subtext that folklore is *historically annotated and repositioned as contemporary.* However, in the case of folklore as art, for it to be art, it cannot simply be read as documentation, and usually the fact that it is presented in an artworld setting is enough to indicate that the piece is operating under a different set of rules. This distance from an actual folk ritual, whilst mirroring the process of a kind of *museumification* of traditions, gives folklore-as-artwork the quality of an untrustworthy artefact. This speculative positioning of folklore as possibly fictional, possibly authentic, emphasises the questioning of the ambiguous quality of authenticity of folklore in the first place.

1.3 The logic of the geographic topsy-turvy

1.3.1 Understanding of British folk customs in Aotearoa New Zealand

My own cultural journey, as a middle-class Pākehā New Zealander from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland to doctoral researcher at the Academy of Fine Art Helsinki, has involved parallel development as a folklore practitioner and a contemporary artist. On one hand, having a mother who was English (but not a morris dancer), meant it made sense to spend time in Britain, as do many New Zealanders with cultural connections there. But after living in Britain for more than a decade in the 2000s, the certain topsy-turvy-ness to cultural life as a transplanted antipodean became more apparent. Cultural traditions in New Zealand that are imported from the Northern Hemisphere are out of place and upside-down in the calendar. Re-engaging with folk traditions that were related to particular points in the calendar in England both helped to make more sense of their meaning but at the same time created some confusion about what it was that I had learned in a New Zealand context in the first place. I also began to notice the topsy-turvy logic at the heart of many folk traditions in Britain and started to understand that this was due to their carnavalesque origins.

One instance of this double topsy-turvy-ness was how, in Auckland in the late 1990s, Green Man Morris and other morris dancers (including some who had driven through the night from Wellington) danced at the top of Maungawhau (or Mt. Eden) on the 1st of May each year, as the sun rose, in a contemporary ritual of inverted contemporary and historical traditions. In England, May

Day is a day where the celebration of spring is often marked by morris dancers as the sun comes up. In New Zealand, a country on the other side of the world to where the tradition originated, we continued in parallel twelve hours ahead of the northern hemisphere, striving to be the first in the world each year. Maungawhau is a public landmark in Auckland, the highest point in the Auckland volcanic field and with a road and path leading to the top with spectacular views across the city. It is also an ancestral mountain of historic significance for Māori, with a long history of settlement.

Accordingly, there are an unbalanced mix of competing traditions, cultures, and understandings in that antipodean celebration of the sun rising. Was it the best place for an English folk tradition to take place? Looking back, I am not at all sure. Apart from any cultural considerations, it is not spring in New Zealand in May, it is autumn – and starting to get dark and cold. The nonsense of celebrating the spring at that time of year in the southern hemisphere was a subject of discussion amongst my morris colleagues and we spoke about creating a corrected version of the seasonal tradition matrix for our southern context, but it never really caught on. In the end, the strange competing logic of British folklore in New Zealand functioned on top of the folk-strangeness already inherent in the traditions themselves. This attempt at continuing British traditional rituals, remade with links to place in New Zealand, and on the other side of the world in the 1990s, felt abstract and



33| Green Man Morris performing on Maungawhau Mt Eden in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland on 1 May 1997.

inauthentic. However, it gave me the framework for the later understanding of the meaning of the traditions, rituals, and customs that I have encountered in this doctoral artistic research. As a Pākehā researcher in Europe, my understanding of how place, community, and history relate to tradition and folk ritual has been a major driver in my practice, particularly in seeking out what people perceive as authentic within their own folk traditions.

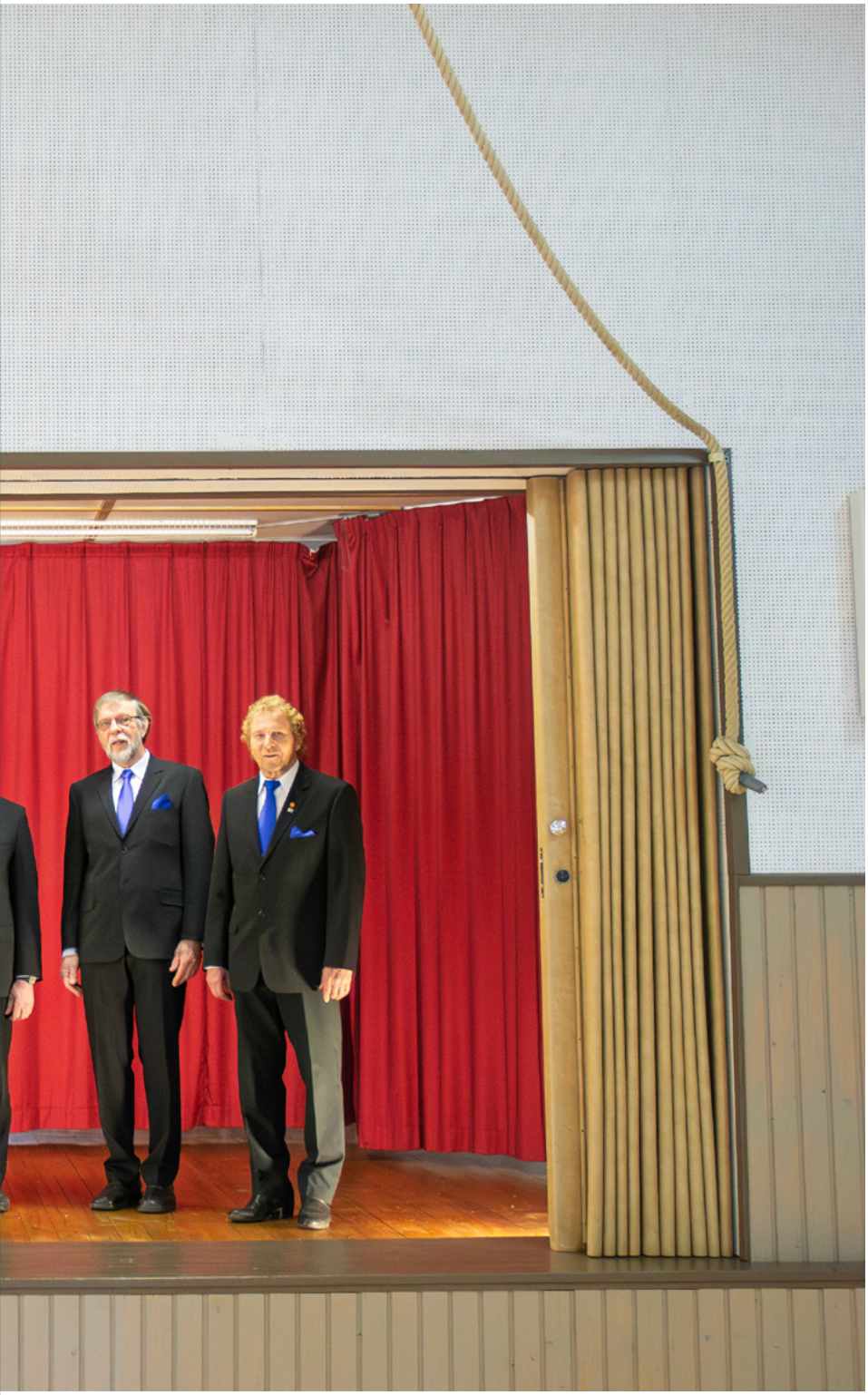
1.3.2 My own position as insider and outsider

I have found that it is possible to artistically inhabit the interchangeable positions of being both an insider and an outsider, something that Mika Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén also recognise as a key element of being an artist-researcher,[54] a position that builds on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's discussion of indigenous research methodologies.[55] These roles are fluid, but in understanding them artistically, it is possible to find a framework for the social and cultural relations that have contributed to the production of the works, at many steps along the way. My own insider/outsider positions lie across the divides and overlaps of folklore and contemporary art, but as an artistic researcher an extra level of awareness of the context of my outsider-ness comes into play.

I now live in Berlin, but as my childhood and early adult life was in New Zealand, I am a foreigner, and therefore an outsider in many situations in Germany and other places in Europe. In contemporary art spaces, however, I can count myself as an insider, knowing the rules, norms, and structures of how the contemporary art system generates its exhibitions, presents artists, and organises events. My art practice operates like a kind of pseudo-folklorist, a process where my status as outsider is often helpful in opening up conversations on similarity and difference within folk practice that I have previously participated in and encountered in other contexts. However, I am also *actually* an insider in the sphere of community ritual folk practice, bringing knowledge and experiences that can be shared with others in similar communities and practices.

Faye Claridge: *When I was looking into the various narratives around disguise, I was told very early by some morris dancers that it was a way for people known within the community to temporarily become strangers, and that having strangers is really important for fertility. I thought that was quite interesting*





34| Production still from *make a peace with the muddy-legged cows*, 2018, digital video, 4 min. 38 sec., made with members of the Mynämäki men's choir.

in terms of performing those important moments, if you're a dancer that believes that's connected. This particular dancer very much believed that what they were doing was to do with fertility and the seasons.

Matthew: *I thought you meant that in terms of increasing the gene pool?*

Faye: *Yeah. But that was the weird connection he was making. He was saying strangers are lucky in folklore, but that it makes sense because strangers are necessary for the gene pool. Therefore, it's lucky. I was like, okay, he was really merging his science and his folklore, and I thought it was a really interesting discussion. He made an interesting point when he was saying you disguise so that everyone in your community can at least pretend not to recognise you. You can pretend not to be known. You can behave in a way that you wouldn't in your usual role. I really like that idea that the rituals – I suppose you could call them – give everyone permission to perform differently, within the rules of, you know, it happens on that particular night in that particular way. And that's really healthy, isn't it? That's your little bit of wild creativity or whatever happens for those performances only. There's something really interesting in that when you apply it to life and the performances and roles that we take on all the time. Folk is a very visible example of that.*

This initial exchange between myself as artist and other folklore practitioners can mark the early stages of an unfolding collaboration, as similar experiences are shared and differences are discussed in the early negotiating stages of how the artistic process is negotiated between artist and other expert collaborators. Returning to Kester, he notes that in an artistic collaboration with a community, this kind of transference, usually involving the past experience of the artist, establishes an equivalence in their positions that can anchor the relationship.[56] Learning how to balance these positions has been one artistic skill that enables me to connect with audiences on the level of both observer and participant, artist and performer, and researcher and subject.

1.4 Sculpture as Wildman

1.4.1 The hairy strangers

The figure of the Wildman, which operates in my work as a representative of wild and strange folk visitors, exists as an allegory with a mysterious anti-history. The Wildman became prominent in Europe during the Middle Ages, developing a lineage as a visual and literary tradition.[57] Both wildmen and wildwomen emerge from various western European mythologies during this period, and they were seen as celebrated hairy characters that represented the antithesis of civilisation. They exist in the forest, on the margins of human society, where their bodies are completely covered in long, shaggy hair. They were medieval representations of instinctive wildness that undermined the authority of nobility and the religious classes, offering a symbolic counterbalance to the ideals of order and restraint.

Various scholars have written on the Wildman's meaning. For instance, in the catalogue essay for the 1980 exhibition *The Wild Man: Medieval Myth and Symbolism*, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Timothy Husband presented the Wildman as a direct contradiction of European civilisation itself, destabilising the authority of the medieval elite.[58] More recently, Michael Taussig has also positioned the figure of the Wildman as an outsider, but he associated the figure with the earliest stages of western European colonial exploration, suggesting that these mythological monsters symbolised a fantasy of what lay beyond the perceived boundaries of the civilised European worldview.[59] In contrast, Gregory Forth emphasises that wildmen are not only European mythic figures, but also common to many cultures worldwide, as hairy strangers, living outside of society.[60]

In the Wildman figures that are seen today in folk rituals and other carnivalesque traditions, the hairiness is often replaced by other materials that symbolically represent elements of wildness, often sourced from nature. These highly costumed and carnivalesque characters reflect the lasting symbolic power of the Wildman, demonstrating its mythic persistence in imagination and festive rituals. The Wildman can represent human fears of nature and instinct itself – as a chaotic monster that lives on the fringes, but also as a figure that might be capable of religious or transformative redemption and human acceptance. These symbolic features of the Wildman are carried in the folklore that I have referenced as *Strawbear* and *May Man* performances made with elaborate costumes, which are in turn transfigured into costumed sculptural arrangements in an exhibition setting.





1.4.2 Costumes as self-portraits

I learned how to make costumes to perform in as a morris dancer in New Zealand. I learned about disguise and the way that wearing a costume in the act of performance separates you from those observing and can transform you into something *other*. This doctoral project has included costumes which characterise the performance of this kind of folk-outsider-ness both as documents of authentic traditional rituals and in artistic constructions of my own.

In *Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots* at the Braunschweiges Landesmuseum, a 16mm film, *The Footwashing*, depicts an imagined meeting between a *Strawbear* and a young woman in a local *Tracht.* Elsewhere in the exhibition, there was the *Courier*, an artistic representation of a *Hochzeitsbitter*'s costume (see 1.5.1 below). In *para field notes* at Photographic Galleria Hippolyte there was a costume made from butter wrappers which invoked the butter stealing *para* in the title of the show and in *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Giessen, amongst many costumes that I made especially for the exhibition, were new costumes made from cameras and microphones. The material heaviness of these pieces involves a physical restriction, imposing an awkward choreography upon the wearer. These were inspired by the coming together

35| Martin Schongauer, *Wild Man Holding a Shield with a Greyhound*, c. 1480/1490, engraving, 7.7 × 7.8 cm.

36| Anonymous (German), Wilder Mann (Wild man), leaf from the *Schembartbuch der Pickertschen Sammlung*, 16th century.

37| Exhibition view of *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Gießen in 2019, showing *Photographer (Wildman)*, 2019, canon digital cameras, textile, chains, mannequin, wooden stand.




WARNING
ELECTRIC FENCE



38| Exhibition view of *para field notes* at Photographic Gallery Hippolyte, Helsinki, in 2018, showing *Butterthief*, 2018, mannequin, rubber boots, overalls, butter wrappers.

of myself as an artist and myself as an observer, documenting the *Strawbear* and *May Man* traditions for the production of the exhibition. There were also costumes made by Alex Merry of Boss Morris in the video performance piece *Bacca Pipes*, which I filmed in Stroud, England. In the exhibition *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki, the costumes were direct artistic references to the process of creating the exhibition, so they were a costume constructed from drumsticks, referencing the experience of working with the Laitakaupungin orkesteri, a Wildman suit made from Nordic walking sticks, and a bear costume that was essentially a readymade object in the exhibition.

This costume-making aspect of my practice represents a kind of core element of the process that I go through as an artist. In many ways these costumes are a form of self-portrait, but they operate as objects and sculptures in an exhibition sense, representing processes and materials that have been significant to the making of the exhibition. In some cases, I have worn or performed in these pieces; in other cases, the pieces are so unwieldly they can only exist as sculptures. As artistic gestures, they can be read as documents in themselves.

The act of attaching objects and materials to a suit designed to carry them close to the body also represents a process of understanding materials in a corporeal way. The gesture of connecting an abundance of objects such as cameras, tobacco pipes, condoms, or microphones to a suit that can be worn is one way of carrying them and of understanding objects in an artistic sense. This kind of costuming practice seems like a natural extension of the kinds of costumes called “tatters” I had made and performed with in Green Man Morris in the 1990s in Auckland. Then, we had



39| Production still from *Bacca Pipes*, 2019, digital video, 6 min. 44 sec., showing a costumed head made by Alex Merry.



40| Exhibition view of *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2020, showing *Drummer*, 2020, drumsticks, textiles, bell wire, wooden stand, mannequin.

used ribbons and rags, sewn onto old shirts, which we called tatters, for our costumes. I feel like I can trace all my costume practice back to these simple tatter costumes, only now I have replaced the ribbons and rags with other materials and objects and, in actuality, most of the costumes I have made are in one way or another, versions of folk devil or Wildman figures.

By constructing these costumes as partial self-portraits they seem to state two positions that might seem at odds with each other. On the one hand, they directly allow my interest in the function of costumes and masks in folklore to become illustrated as a sculptural and literal presence in an exhibition. As I mentioned in an interview before the exhibition at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki, as static figures in an exhibition, they have a latent potential – their performance can be imagined, and they can seem at any moment to be about to come alive.[61] Moreover, by introducing the idea of masking and disguise they also raise the possibility of a hidden positionality within the work. This disguise function, which at least appears to conceal identity, is an element of the uncanny and strange effect that the costume pieces can generate. Part of this uncanny feeling can be experienced from mistaking the mannequin figures as real – as I have done many times as I open the door to my studio in the morning, but as hidden witnesses in an exhibition, they are silent observers, occupying a role as performers and documenters, and this in turn means that their presence deals with authorship. They enact gestures and narratives on my behalf, yet their masked faces and static bodies shield me from direct exposure. The metaphorical

act of masking, central to the folklore I reference, means that I am able to inhabit multiple positions simultaneously – as the maker, the subject and the viewer – whilst maintaining a degree of distance as the artist of the works.

Over the course of this doctoral project, with its necessary focus on placing my artistic self in text, I have noticed that possibility and also responsibility are two of the character traits I am most aware of when researching and exhibiting. In *The Scream of the Strawbear*, I realised that whilst I observed the two Wildman traditions that were central to the project, with camera in hand, I also felt their ritual presence in my own self. Partly through my own experience of participation in folk rituals, and partly through my own live art performance experience, I had an affinity for these characters and the people who were inside the Wildman costumes.

Artistically, these perceptions later distilled themselves into the sculptural costume works – such as *Photographer (Wildman)*, *Camera Operator (Wildman)*, and *Sound Operator (Wildman)* – that were covered in cameras or microphones. By encasing these figures in the literal tools of documentation, the performance-as-installation flips the perspective, because the costume itself looks back at the viewer. The camera-covered Wildman sees but can't be seen. The microphone figure is covered in listening devices, but it stands silently in the gallery. These artistic paradoxes approach the mysterious core of ritual Wildman figures by emulating their disguise function – the public and private versions of performative self – whilst also over-elaborating the materials of documentation. They invert the elements of visibility, surveillance, and self-representation of the source figures and change the observer to the observed.



41 | Green Man Morris performing in "tatters" at Stable Lane in Auckland in the 1990s.

1.5 The beginnings of the working process with folklore, artefacts and art

1.5.1 Working with artefacts as art and art as artefact

Primarily my artistic process begins by bringing together visual materials, and so for any potential exhibition project, initial research involves searching in image archives alongside discussions with other experts and practitioners. This historical contextualisation of the place of folk rituals, traditions, and cultures and their associated materials has become a significant object of my research. This method builds on patterns of visual motives of my own practice, such as folk costumes, performance documentation, and installation work, but is also directly related to specific locality and the archived and oral folk knowledges of a specific place. Along the way, the process includes the historical interpretation of folk materials through collaboration with museums, bringing an artistic examination of not just the folklore itself as a subject but also how it is mediated and presented in historical and cultural institutions. The research process might begin, for example, with images that are publicly available in an online archived collection, or it might involve negotiating a visit to a museum's collection to look at objects first-hand. The process would include specific objects from the museum's collection and a discussion about their usage (or mystery about their usage) to a point where an artistic response can emerge. This might be an idea for incorporating the original artefact itself in an installation or an idea for a completely new work. For example, in the exhibition I worked on at the Braunschweiges Landesmuseum, one research track focused on the character of the *Hochzeitsbitter* (wedding inviter), as the museum itself had an example of a *Hochzeitsbitter*'s hat in their collection. This later resulted in my piece *Courier* (**see Img. 4 and 85**).



42| The top hat of a *Hochzeitsbitter* from Wolfenbüttel-Linden, 1st half of the nineteenth century, felt, silk, paper. Collection Braunschweiges Landesmuseum, Inv. No.: VMB 2653.

As well as inserting new artworks into historical museum collections, I have also included objects belonging to collections of various historical museums into exhibitions in art spaces, creating a temporary change in the status of these specific historical objects. They temporarily become included in my exhibition as art, and although they clearly retain their status as museum objects overall, they bring relational qualities that can change the way in which they and other elements of the works are viewed.[62] This offers a way of looking at these objects within a new artistic framework, whilst noticing their unique characteristics as museum objects from a specific kind of institution. For this period of time, these museum artefacts are viewed under the conditions of art and so inherit some of the values

and characteristics of art in the way that they are displayed. In some cases, I have also included their historic or museum display cases and other presentation aids as well, guaranteeing that their presentation as museum objects is clear, but at the same time including in their examination as art, a kind of re-examination of these objects.

1.5.2 Folklore characteristics I keep returning to

There are multiple ways to begin the process of researching an exhibition project related to folklore and customs, but there are certain motifs that have always had primary value to me, and these often serve as the key starting points for a new project. I have built up an artistic practice that makes use of these motifs as a visual language, as well as a practice that addresses meaning and knowledge in their presentation in an institutional and an artistic sense. I try to trace these visual motifs and conceptual frameworks within their social and historical frameworks. They come up in cycles in my work, as visual references that I come back to in different situations, and which continue to fascinate and provoke my interest. Each has its own strange aesthetic pull, and I circle and approach them from differing perspectives. But at the heart of most of them is a pleasure in the visual spectacle of folklore, and I am trying to understand this folklore-as-spectacle by making use of the seeing/making/reflecting skills I have developed along the way.

In practice, this means focusing on a set of motifs:

The aesthetics and materiality of hand-made costumes used for folk rituals.

One definition of folk itself is something that can be done at a domestic level, or with the materials that you might literally have at hand.[63] So, in this vein, the folk costumes that I have always been familiar with are handmade and self-produced. They make use of materials that might be familiar in any home, repurposing old textiles and clothes. There is a pleasure in making a costume for yourself, and my costumes are constructed around myself as a model, making the disguise fit the proportions of my body.

Characters that can be considered as "Wildman" or "devil" figures in folk rituals and customs.

Over the course of this project, references to devils and Wildman-like figures can be uncovered in each exhibition project. In the period

of research for the show in Seinäjoki, I quickly became interested in the stone that sat on Mauri's land, from which the devil was said to emerge in the middle of the night on midsummer's evening, and an image of that stone and its mythology became a central motif for me during the production of the exhibition.

Topsy-turvy logic and inversions in the underlying logic and structure of folk traditions.

At its heart, folklore is a joyful, social practice of performance that often revolves around humour and visual spectacle. The *May Man* in Rittershausen carries a heavy stick which he periodically uses to hit the eggshells in his headpiece, leaving a trail of broken shells at various points in his procession through the village. This action appears quite strange and unusual when observed for the first time; a kind of self-sabotage that both marks the performance of the ritual with shattered eggshells and draws attention to itself as an action and spectacle. It is humorous in a way that is more strange than funny. This kind of humour in folklore is something that I find fascinating artistically, because it is an integral part of the performance in the symbolic meaning of folklore, and so it is something that I trace in my practice through artworks installations and exhibitions. I try to reflect the humour not only as a joke or a pastiche but as an aesthetic of folk ritual itself. Much of this carnivalesque-like logic belongs to long-standing traditions and rituals, and the element of humour is present in many kinds of folk spectacles across Europe and Britain.

Museological attempts at portraying folklore.

Because of folklore's expressive social qualities, what is displayed in museums in a European context are often artefacts or documentation of folk rituals or tradition. This can make for museum displays with many gaps in understanding of an item's or practice's true purpose. Artistically, these gaps are one starting point for my practice, reassembling meaning in new ways (Suzanne Lacy's "ahahah experience"[64]), producing a combination of things that has not been seen before and a search for new artistic kinds of originality. Essentially, the process is engaging in speculative and imaginative practices that can suppose histories and possibilities for these objects and displays that are temporarily integrated into my work.

The marking of place in traditional folk ritual and celebration.
In Green Man Morris we developed our own tiny ritual of tossing tea bags onto the ceiling as a way of marking a new practice space. It was a tiny gesture of mark-making and group community expression, a ritual celebration as a generative process of renewing and celebrating a place together. On a wider scale, annual folk rituals, such as the *Strawbear* and *May Man* traditions I worked with in Hessen, re-iterate the same place each year as a marker point, not only in the sense of place, but also acknowledging the ongoing years.

The uncovering the past in the present, through folk rituals reiterating themselves year after year.
The *Strawbear* appears in the village of Königsberg each year in February and it functions across temporal dimensions. Königsberg is a small outlying village, outside Giessen, populated by a mixture of historic buildings and more modern standalone houses, a few bus stops, a pub, and a kindergarten. The appearance of the *Strawbear* on the street amongst modern cars, people in yellow vests, and modern dress immediately creates an incongruity in time. The wildness of the straw costume does not let you know from which, if any, period of history it has come from; or whether it has perhaps come from the natural world as a Wildman. This incongruity is one level that the initial view of the *Strawbear* offers. It is not immediately clear that it is human; although it awkwardly walks like a person, the disguise completely obliterates the identity of whoever is inside it. It is an important custom that the identity of the person who wears the straw is not known to the rest of the community. Part of this process of re-iteration is that elements of the ritual retain their core appearance, whilst the setting changes each year around them.

1.6 Trust in collaboration and exchange

1.6.1 Access to hidden knowledge

A core element of this doctoral project has been the collaborative relationships that have been involved in the process at many stages of production. These collaborations have been with a wide variety of groups, institutions, and individuals, offering time, materials and cultural objects that have contributed to the overall shape of artistic works and research. In the case of working with a museum's collection, it has involved specific discussions of artefacts with expert

curatorial staff and technicians, but the process of working collaboratively with participants in a folk custom itself can unfold in other ways. It usually begins as a documentary method, simply recording and photographing (sometimes amongst many photographers) a folk spectacle or ritual. As an artist following the *Strawbear* or *May Man* procession, I had access to the process of building costumes that would otherwise be hidden, and so arranging to introduce myself and my practice beforehand was an important part of the process. As a folklore practitioner myself, the question that is asked at the beginning of the process of research and making contact, is not one about collaborating artistically, but one of interest and exchange. These opening questions might come directly from myself as the artist, or on my behalf from the institution that I am working with.

Artist Lindsay Seer's understanding of a process of corroboration also feels important to note as a model for understanding what can be produced over the course of an exchange or enquiry as part of the work of producing an exhibition. In a post on her website, Seer puts forward the term "corroboration" as an alternative to collaboration, in part because of the increasingly unclear definition of authorship of the contemporary artist.[65] Corroboration can operate as a way of artistically supporting the position of others without necessarily sharing in constructing that position. The notions of shared and equal labour at the heart of nineteenth-century definitions of the word collaboration[66] (to "co-labor") are clearly no longer applicable for an artist working with many people in many roles over the course of the research and production of an exhibition. Artists work with other people for many reasons, including, as art theorist Claire Bishop outlines, "to problematise the binaries of live and mediated, spontaneous and staged, authentic and contrived; to examine the construction of collective identity and the extent to which people always exceed these categories".[67] In these practices, the acknowledgement of difference and support for each other's position towards the goal of producing an artistic outcome as *corroboration*, seems to offer a more productive understanding of what might have happened in the production of an exhibition involving multiple skills, views, and expertise.

1.6.2 The true nature of collaboration

There is undoubtedly a great weight to the term collaboration, and often it does not offer a useful description of what actually takes

place between artists and experts in other fields. As Kester points out, collaboration and exchange can sometimes be not entirely positive terms of description, as the relationship between artist and community can be weighted in particular ways that remain hidden.[68] There can also be the tension surrounding who the artist thinks that they are making the work for – a global art audience or a set of local collaborators?[69] Of course the answer to this can include multiple audiences, but it can guide many choices in how the work is produced. In my case, cooperation is at times useful in defining the relationship, yet at other times, conversation might be more descriptive as information and materials are exchanged. In this process I am assisted as the artist in the production of new work and in return I offer, as a starting point, knowledge and experience from other times that I have worked with folklore communities in similar settings, artistic citations, and sometimes editions of the works that are produced.

In these collaborative scenarios, Lacy also describes modes of artistic practice that span a continuum from the artist, as experiencer, reporter, analyst, or activist. This maps out a range of skills from the observational to the shaping of theoretical positions.[70] I can recognise some of these modes of practice in my own work even though they all occur at different times in the process and often overlap and complement each other. But in recognising the collaborative relationship as one of delegation from artist to cultural performer, Bishop also touches on the reason that these kinds of artistic relationships with collaborative, cultural others are so prevalent; that is, that the delegated other(s) to which the artist is working with, lends a sense of cultural authenticity to the artist, in ways in which the artist would not normally have access to.[71] This need to engage with authenticity and the strategic delegation of cultural labour complicates practices of principled cultural collaboration. It requires a critical need to assess the power dynamics at play in the process of creating works. There is a need to remain aware of the roles that each party is playing to ensure that the partnership serves everyone and avoids merely instrumentalising the collaborator's cultural capital as the artist's work.

43| Production still from *Horn Calls*, 2018, digital video, 4 min. 14 sec., showing Minna Hokka, a traditional instrument maker and musician from Turku, Finland.

44| Production still from *Horn Calls*, 2018, digital video, 4 min. 14 sec.

1.6.3 The nature of the exchange

In my practice, the process of working with others requires different levels of negotiation and brokerage and I would like to give some examples that occurred as part of this research. First, for *The*





Scream of the Strawbear, I approached Boss Morris, a group of morris dancers in order to ask them to perform a specific dance for me on video. This exchange was on the level of friends and colleagues, as I have performed with Alex Merry previously and many of the dancers are artists themselves, understanding the ideas I put forward and offering their own takes on how the video might work. It was an enjoyable and fun process, and as many of us are artists the implications of making work together under my invitation and direction are understood.

In *Wildness Makes This World*, I worked with a group of local people who volunteered to work with me to produce a definition of wildness through understanding place, objects, and memory. The invitation to local people to participate in the project came through the institution, Kunsthalle Seinäjoki, and all the participants had a chance to become familiar with an understanding of the kinds of works that I make through an introduction event, hosted by the Kunsthalle. Later, there was a chance to meet each person individually to get to know them and to see the places that they suggest might work for a definition of wildness. Through a series of open-ended conversations with me, the structure of the meetings and the decisions about what might work in documenting a place or an object for the exhibition were made; this was undertaken alongside the curatorial team from the Kunsthalle. This deliberate openness in the process of working with participants is an important part of my artistic practice as it done with the hope of generating experimental and meaningful new directions in the process, bypassing assumptions about what might be expected from knowledge of my previous works for example, or an any understanding of what is and what is not art.[72]

Overall, these relationships were mediated by the Kunsthalle, helping with translation where necessary and the logistics of meeting and arranging for objects and their descriptions to be included in the exhibition. Later, final images from the exhibition and each individual exchange were shared with the participants and there was a chance for feedback.

For *The Scream of the Strawbear*, I worked with local traditional societies to document their folk ritual and discuss their practice, later using some of the material in the exhibition. Kunsthalle Gießen made contact with the groups that organised the traditional rituals of the *Strawbear* in Königsberg and the *May Man* rituals in Steinbrucken and Rittershausen. They described me as a New Zealand artist interested in what they are doing and enquired

about the possibility of an exchange of information. It was arranged that I could meet people involved in the traditions and take photographs and video the folk rituals. In each case it was possible to enter the private space of the Traditionsverein or the volunteer Feuerwehr (fire department) who were preparing the costumes. Witnessing these team efforts of construction and transformation were very important to me, as the spaces were quite private and intimate. Being there whilst the *Strawbear* or the *May Man* was being constructed solidified trust in our relationship, my understanding of the ritual, and my permission to be there and to document.

Later, as I looked through the photographs and video materials that I had collected, in each case many questions arose. The Traditionsverein Königsberg sent me further historical material for which the Kunsthalle helped mediate translation and communication. At the opening of the exhibition, some people from the Traditionsverein Königsberg screamed out loud in reply to the screaming of the strawbear itself on the video presented in the space. Some staff of the Feuerwehr from Rittershausen and Steinbrucken attended in uniform. A couple of years later, the Traditionsverein Königsberg asked me to design a new *Strawbear* motif for T-shirts, and this design was integrated into new editions that were presented again at Kunsthalle Gießen in 2023 (**Img. 45**).

Matthew: *In some ways, it's about trust, right? When you show that you also know and care quite a lot about the subject, you're developing trust with people.*

Stewart Morgan Hajdukiewicz: *Yeah. And that is, of course, the main reason Butterworth and Bob Williams managed to collect all the songs and dances they did – because they knew about them and they could have this trust. You can't steal a song, actually, someone has to give it to you, so you might as well have a rapport because otherwise you're going to get sweet FA. So, that was my angle.*

In each of these cases, where others have been involved in the process of producing new artistic material, the approach was made

by me as the artist, or by the Kunsthalle/institution on my behalf. It might seem obvious, but the request to work with others originally came from me, as I am the one who wanted to make the exhibition in the first place. Where the invitation came from a Kunsthalle, the mediating influence of the institution helped to legitimise the invitation and present my interest as authentic. My role as authorised artist in sharing expertise and inviting participation does not mean that final authorship of the work is given up, even though, as Kaija Kaitavuori points out, it can be a common contemporary practice to leave at least some of the responsibility of the content of the work to non-art professionals.[73] In my case, this is a crucial element of the production of the work; however, in the final presentation of the exhibition, it is important that all the contributors to the exhibition are acknowledged in a way that they are comfortable with. This is not simply about giving credit – a parallel perhaps to a system of referencing in a text – but is also about acknowledging that an audience wants to know how the show was constructed, including who was actively involved. This form of crediting, particularly when artworks and exhibitions are situated in the field of folk culture is important in signalling, not just that an exchange has taken place in the production of an exhibition, but that the artist was enabled to produce the work in a process of corroboration of other's practices, knowledge. and expertise.

45| Strawbear cotton T Shirt, 2023, edition of 50.



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71 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 237.

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77.

THE ARTIST IS NOT QUITE AN ETHNOG-RAPHER



46| Exhibition view of *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2020.

2.1 Stepping over authenticity into speculative aesthetics

2.1.1 The indistinct space between the ethnographic and artistic

Folklore can seem obscure or even unknown to those unfamiliar with a particular tradition, but most people people have, at least, an experience or memory of observing or participating in a form of folk custom. In contemporary art, where folklore is less commonly addressed than in museums, it is a specific kind of field. In museums, folklore is often framed as a historical phenomenon, while contemporary art likes to anchor itself in the present.

This obscurity can also manifest as questions of authenticity. For instance, sometimes I hear from visitors to my exhibitions that they are unsure how to look at the work, on what level it is authentic, or how begin to respond to subject matter they are unfamiliar with. Questions arise on the level of the authenticity of traditions that I am working with, or to what extent there is fiction involved in the works. I take heart in these questions, as they mirror the thoughts that surfaced while making the works; that is, from my point of view, a sense of doubt or estrangement would be some recognition that the works were asking the right questions, providing spaces that give permission for other possibilities to be imagined. For a viewer though, I recognise that it can take some time to uncover the frameworks that the works are operating in, including how the works are cited and presented in a gallery or other context. These questions are not just about folklore as it appears in contemporary art, but also about traditions themselves, where they come from, and who are the people involved in them.

One explanation for this uncertainty that can occur when trying to approach folklore-as-artwork is that the artwork falls into an indistinct space between two kinds of discourses: an ethnographic, historical point of view and a contemporary artistic point of view. This ambiguity often manifests itself in an uneasiness about the process by which the artist has produced artworks that reference, document and reflect on folklore and cultural traditions.

2.1.2 The feeling of authenticity

Some of the appeal of folklore comes from the feeling that because

it is rooted in tradition, it possesses a unique authenticity. This authenticity is a factor that marks folk traditions out from many other parts of modern social life, where they can be seen as a device for trying to recapture fragments of the past in the present. Folk traditions are often seen as a social channel with access to the past, providing continuity and identity through community participation. While they offer a grounding alternative to the rapid pace of modern life, folklore is equally a phenomenon of the present. Contemporary culture constantly generates its own subcultures, rituals, and digital lore, customs that may one day be recognised as traditions in their own right.

The feeling of authenticity that goes along with folklore is nevertheless complicated by the multiple ways it is experienced and understood. Regina Bendix notes that what is considered authentic is often a constructed and socially negotiated reality rather than an objectively authentic historical certainty.[74] Questions can then arise about what could be considered an original version of a tradition or whether folk performances are faithful re-enactments or creative reinterpretations and how these are related to the idea of folklore as a living tradition in the first place. But even though it may not be inherent to a tradition, the quality or aura of authenticity remains essential to the idea of folklore and this is also central to how it is mediated as artwork. Willow G. Mullins emphasises the complicated status of folklore-as-artwork when folklore is "mechanically reproduced".[75] The question is: if there is a kind of authentic aura to folklore in its original context, does it then become lost in reproduction, or does the folklore-as-artwork engage in a new kind of transferred aura of authenticity?

Authenticity can clearly exist as a quality that does not necessarily have to be tied to historical or factual understanding; for example, it can also reside in an authenticity of collective purpose, or the integrity of collective celebration of place. Despite this, many people feel that folklore does hold past knowledge that has been forgotten and so there is value in re-engaging with folk practices in order to remind us of where we have come from and what we might have lost. Reflecting on an aesthetics of folk authenticity involves seeing how authenticity is performed, displayed, and valued across different social and cultural contexts, and how it influences people's identities. Engaging with folklore and tradition in these terms means understanding that there is actually a need to view the expression, materiality, and collective practice of folklore as authentic, even if it is historically complicated.

2.1.3 The aesthetics of folk authenticity

In my works, an artistic focus on the popularity of folk traditions has meant there is a parallel focus on their handcrafted aesthetic in their further translation as artworks. These handmade qualities of many objects of folklore are natural propositions for artistic engagement as they also hold similar characteristics to artworks. The value placed on the unique and the original object in the realm of contemporary art practice, however, at first seems to be at odds with the traditional and collective values of folklore. This contrast opens questions at the heart of my artistic research.

The visual language of the performance register of folklore is grounded in its situated materiality, taking the form of costumes stitched from handed-down textiles, for example, or handmade ritual props and masks, and the creative use of everyday things. These qualities also extend to other aspects of folklore, in that their materialities are of the everyday and what is "to hand", such as stories or songs that can be repeated through generations. When brought into the reflective context of artistic research, artefacts of folklore (and also fictional artefacts of folklore) offer a framework for considering how the material and performative dimensions of folk customs can resonate outside their original settings. As artefacts and art objects, they carry textures of community and performance within them that illuminate folklore's continued place in our collective imagination. Their handmade-ness offers an opening in how we can read them as a handcrafted and creative expression for the purpose of an investment in tradition and celebration. Reflecting on this aesthetic transformation brings us to an understanding that goes beyond that of an autonomous art object to include the relational histories that the materials and craft of the object embody and reactivate.

2.1.4 The problem of authenticity in tradition

If the appeal of folklore stems from the perception (but not necessarily the reality) that it embodies a unique authenticity for both its participants and audiences, then this focus on authenticity is also an element of the traditional and conservative aspects of folklore. Traditional culture that strives to preserve and protect traditions and cultural forms often shows a resistance to change and development. When folk traditions are repeated for the idea of tradition alone, without the vitality of living and creative folk expression, they

risk becoming mere re-enactments, detached from and unanimated by the present. A perception of authenticity in tradition is also one reason why various forms of nationalism attempt to co-opt aspects of folklore for political gain.

2.2 Folklore in the shadows of nationalism

2.2.1 Folklore as suspicious idealogy

Uncoupling folklore from the grand national theories that had weaponised tradition in the service of the state is one of the processes at play in an artistic re-negotiation of folklore. In Germany, there remains a particular suspicion of folklore in general, and an ongoing misgiving that it might be associated with nationalism. This uneasiness stems from folklore's long, problematic connotations after being mis-adopted by Nazi propagandists earlier in the twentieth century. In 1920s Germany, folklore became an object of study, and at its centre was the romantically influenced notion of the "spiritual matrix of the people", something that twisted into a much more sinister preoccupation with falsely equated ancient origins for German rites and customs.[76] This deliberate perversion of folklore was encouraged during the Nazi period and developed in service of government propaganda.

This suspicion continued into the 1970s, when Joseph Beuys's works repurposing folk mythologies were seen by some as a controversial, regressive step in Germany, although others saw him as tapping into the strong global tradition of twentieth-century folklore that sought renewed understandings of mythologies of nature and the cosmos.[77] Beuys showed that he understood folklore as dynamic in a speculative, artistic sense, twisting the perspective of folklore towards other possibilities.

It was also in the 1970s that a simple two-sentence statement, called the "Falkenstein Formula", by German folklorist Hermann Bausinger sought to re-define folklore in a German context: "*Volkskunde* (folklore) analyzes the transmission of cultural values (including their causes and the processes which accompany them) in their objective and subjective form. The goal is to contribute to solving sociocultural problems."[78] This re-positioning allowed for the uncoupling of folklore from any notion of a grand national theory of "the folk". Following this repositioning of folklore in Germany, the academic study of folklore transferred to the discipline of ethnology.

The trauma of state-mandated folklore was not unique to

the German context, however, as it resonates across countries of the former European Eastern bloc. In this context, the "authenticity" of "the folk" was often utilised for a different grand political ideology.

> **Mariana Novotná:** *For me, folk was destroyed by communists. You know, it was something I didn't like because I knew it from the television from my childhood, and it was something not real; it was used for propaganda. So I didn't like it. But when Tereza [Bušková] showed me this new [artistic] point of view, I started to enjoy it and research. It was like magic for me.*

Mariana Novotná's turn from viewing folklore as propaganda towards something like a source of "magic" emphasises the agency of reclaiming these traditions through artistic means. A new artistic point of view is one way that it is possible to navigate the darker histories of folklore without becoming trapped by the political and socially constructed ideologies that have historically surrounded them.

Also in contrast to the perception of a grand narrative of authentic traditional folklore, art historian and transculturality theorist Monica Juneja positions tradition as a site where self-reflexive agency and historical entanglement can unfold.[79] It becomes a space where social identities and histories are formed through negotiation, and this often takes place at the intersections of multiple cultures, locations, and generations. From this perspective, traditions are seldom isolated from their social context, and traditional folklore is viewed as a dynamic process of inclusivity in understanding societies as transcultural. It places tradition as a living, negotiated resource that can sometimes be contested and reinterpreted. It becomes critical for the re-imagining of new futures beyond the boundaries of cultural essentialism or nationalism.[80]

2.2.2 Local vs nationalism

During the period I spent researching *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Gießen in 2019, I visited the ethnography department at the University of Marburg. There, Prof. Siegfried Becker discussed some ethnographic perspectives on understanding these customs. The screaming of the *Strawbear* can be understood as



47| Gareth Kennedy, *Die Unbequeme Wissenschaft* (The uncomfortable science), 2014, masks, installation at Ar/Ge Kunst in 2014.

belonging to a group of customs that could be classified as masked protest, or ritualised non-specific demonstrations. In the archives, there were many striking photographs of *Strohbären* and *Maimänner*, including from during the Nazi period. In some of the documentary photographs of traditions from this time, it is possible to see Nazi symbols on flags and banners in the background of village scenes and, even now, these historic images of Nazi symbols still have the power to shock.

The connection between folklore and far-right nationalism has been clear in many instances in twentieth-century Europe; however, at the same time, the folklore that I am particularly interested in remains highly localised and domestic. The contrast between local and particular traditional customs and a fascist nationalistic ideology jars on many levels. Part of the shock of the association with nationalism is that it seems disingenuous to bring together nationalist symbols with local tradition. It seems that highly localised traditions represent the opposite of nationalistic positions because of their particular and unique characteristics. Folklore that becomes swept up in propaganda on nationhood and nationalist narratives, such as in many European nationalist movements of the twentieth century, and even some contemporary ones, becomes the opposite of what it was originally understood as – a romantic symbol of authentic culture with a link to real lived experience.[81]

An artistic strategy that inverts this history of ideological co-optation is found in the dark humour of artist Gareth Kennedy's 2014 installation *Die Unbequeme Wissenschaft* (The uncomfortable

science). The work sets up an audience to imagine a scenario where wooden masks, carved in the tradition of South Tyrol wooden devil masks (but actually depicting discredited nationalist and Nazi-era anthropologists) are not traditional but contemporary folk devils. Sited in a version of a heritage Tyrolian lounge room, the audience has the chance to engage in a speculation of an inverted history. The specific reference is to the SS Ahnenerbe Kulturkommission, the Nazi's so-called "ancestors' heritage cultural commission", which, between 1939 and 1942, worked to preserve cultural customs, music, dialect, and folk costumes in South Tyrol.[82] In a kind of rebalancing of the anthropological register, the masks repackage the cultural commission itself as the historic, symbolic devils of the episode.

As the current surge of far-right political ideologies brings echoes of these times back into our own contemporary lives, it is possible to recognise that folklore can also offer a chance to participate in folk customs in an open, inclusive, and collective sense. Traditions offer the chance to connect uniquely to communities that come together around a certain time and place.[83] It feels also important to recognise that tradition itself is a contested space and operates on multiple levels of understanding. Juneja's answer to a fraught understanding of tradition and the dangers of its connection to nationalist causes that nurture cultural essentialisms, is to recognise the agency of artists and cultural practitioners in working with tradition.[84] She highlights how tradition can serve as a carrier of memories that can be actively reimagined in understanding other pasts and futures. Understanding tradition can be a positive process in recognising the nuances of cultural difference and challenging cultural rigidities, returning the focus to the human experience of tradition, as an understanding of its essential living quality.

48|
49| Daniela Weirich, double-sided exhibition poster for *para field notes*, 2018.



2.3 The ethnographic turn vs. "pseudo-ethnography"

2.3.1 Relinquishing factuality for fantasy

Since the early 1970s, when artists such as Josepth Kosuth and Susan Hiller began engaging with artistic methods that mirrored anthropology and other social scientific methods, the convergence of anthropology and art has brought forward the so-called "ethnographic turn", bringing new ways of thinking about artistic practices. In the 1980s, James Clifford outlined the wider artistic possibilities of ethnographic work, seeking to open up the practice of ethnography, developing a new kind of language for other imaginable outcomes



Fuligo Septica, Hexenbutter, paranvi
[pora vomit/shit]



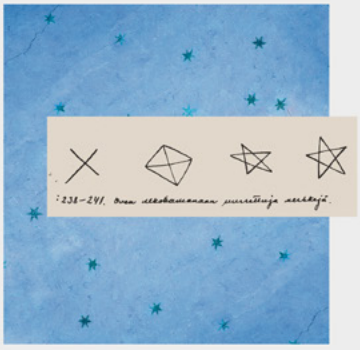
Mina's horns 28-4-2017 near Turku.



Bear's claw/nail. Bear body parts = good for healing/protection
National Museum (Helsinki)



New Zealand Journal of Agriculture, August 1977
"some cannot see electricity"

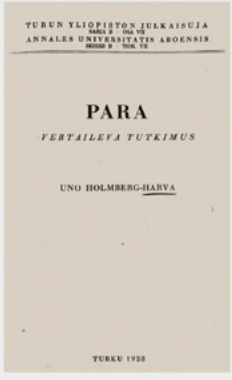


Magic Marks were carved into the farmhouse door
(collected 1935 - National Board of Antiquities)



'Anna Sundell flavors butter' portrait T.o.2oc. Bio
(National Board of Antiquities)





'para' (1928). U. Holmberg-Harva 'para's theory'
[There is only a limited amount of luck in the world]
See also R. Pulkkinen (2016)



Male snakes emerge first to get ready for mating — Spring 2017



Kalanti Church. Paint before christianity later became depicted as Kalanti Church Vol 2 Finnish and Salonian Bible





Fuligo Septica 3 forms / 803

than academic study.[85] Artists were moving towards a more engaged, subjective mode of practice and as the relationship between artists and anthropology developed, techniques and subjects overlapped considerably between fields and modes of enquiry. Kosuth's definition that the "artist is a model of the anthropologist, *engaged*", pushed the idea of a conceptually engaged artist, aware of the mediating cultural implications of art practice.[86] A subsequent generation of artists have only amplified and expanded this mode of engagement, in dealing with culture as a field of practice. Engagement with cultural forms is now commonplace in many artistic disciplines.

Katri Hirvonen-Nurmi: *When I studied ethnography at university, we had to make a practicum in ethnography, and measuring is something that we started to learn. We went out into a village and interviewed the local people, and then we measured their houses and other constructions, like the height and the breadth and the square metres. Then we interviewed who had lived there and who had constructed which part, and which major changes had taken place.*

Matthew: *Oh. So, the subtext of that is that it might be reconstructed somewhere else?*

Katri: *I think that's not the aim of the ethnographer. It is more for describing.*

Matthew: *What do you mean?*

Katri: *Yeah. The measures are for description. I think it is related to natural history and the so-called scientific method and this Enlightenment age when people want to be scientific.*

Ethnography is a practice based in observing those participating in cultural practices, and is a significant method of anthropological study. The actual meaning of the term ethnographic can mean different things in different contexts. Artistically, the term is applied more freely than in the academic frameworks of anthropology; for

example, it often means that something resembles an ethnographic document or process, rather than actually being ethnographic itself. This is closest to my own sense of the term in that "ethnographic" refers to the kinds of visual materials that might be similar to those an ethnographer produces, such as video or other image-based material. However, it is never my intention that the artwork is actually ethnographic in an academic sense; rather, it is more that it makes use of the materiality and the form of ethnography, but is essentially artistic. As social anthropologist Arnd Schneider points out, the basic understanding that the works are sited in galleries (or marked as artworks in museums) and their aesthetic medium is visual, marks them out from anthropological study in other contexts.[87] The works that I produce operate in a discursive sense that is predominantly experimental, with their understanding developed in the aesthetic appreciation of folklore as object, spectacle, event, colour, sound, and many other things.

Originally trained as an anthropologist, Susan Hiller recalled the shift in her practice from anthropology to art being that she "would relinquish factuality for fantasy".[88] In blurring the boundaries between fact and invention and consciously adopting pseudo methods, it is possible to work in a state of productive uncertainty, within an aesthetic context. Such pseudo-artistic approaches, when they are executed well, do not simply borrow from other fields, but show a reconfiguration of the discipline, critically reimagining what is possible. Many kinds of artistic practice, including those resembling ethnography, result from this kind of parallactic repositioning of artistic viewpoint. This assuming the viewpoint of another field as "experiencer and reporter"[89] or from the point of view of another vocation can be a deliberate artistic ploy to operate in another field, in order to report back findings, to present field notes, or to offer documentary evidence, as art. Personally, I find that it is important to seek out situations where I am artificially out of my depth or inexperienced and untested, in order to test the scope of my practice. In this doctoral project it has not been difficult to find myself in these situations, either through language barriers or learning new local histories and cultural traditions. But there are endless layers of artistic exploration that are involved in an artistic research process. In arranging these points of view reflectively, something speculative and new can emerge.

2.3.2 The pseudo-ethnographic responsibility

This mode of artistic practice was critiqued in "The Artist as

Ethnographer", a mid-1990s essay by art historian Hal Foster.[90] While recognising the many ways that artists were working with other cultural groups, traditions, practices, and materials, he questioned the understanding of such practices, revealing both the potential and the problematic in these ways of working. Foster showed that taking what he called a "pseudo ethnographic" position, also brings social and moral responsibilities to an artist and the institutions they work with. Artworks that operate in this mode also invoke the authority of any "quasi-anthropological" claim they might make, even though as artworks the statements they construct operate in a different discusive field to the social sciences.[91] This is not to say that the practice steps away from that of being an artist, however. The process of learning another viewpoint, through working in a "pseudo" or "quasi" discipline, can result in a unique and particular artistic working method shifting the point of perspective and opening up other artistic positions that might not have been previously possible.

Common understandings of the prefix "pseudo" might suggest something like fake or falsified, but in an artistic context, fictional practice is often inherent, a necessary starting point. For Foster, the "pseudo" seems to mean "the Artist is Not Quite an Ethnographer"; however, *psuedo-ethnology* could actually bring together an artistic understanding of fictional practice and a borrowing of the aesthetic and methodological frameworks of ethnology, as a not inevitably unconstructive combination. This methodological borrowing is not about producing the same outcomes as anthropological study or ethnographic methods; rather, it is a technique to produce artworks. If the aim of the artist is to create artwork and the production of artistic knowledge, then even if it resembles the production of ethnographic knowledge, it serves these other artistic objectives. Although the works might resemble political or social action or its documentation, its aesthetic sensibility, as Lacy points out, is what distinguishes it as artistic.[92] The impluse of the artist is to treat the aesthetic experience in the opposite manner to the anthropologist; that is, prioritising it as a potentially transformative space, bringing play, imagination, and the kinds of transgression that would be beyond the boundaries of usual considersations of ethics in anthropology.[93] I find it important to remember that my own artistic model relies on questions rather than outcomes, prioritising imagination, fantasy, and uncertainty. A discursive mode can be generated from the materials at play in the works, one that moves

in the opposite direction to anthropological research practice, highlighting the aesthetic experience and all the strange uncertainty that it can encompass.

One response to Foster's critique of the ethnographic turn lies in disrupting the detached position of the artist, who otherwise might remain detached from the process, while presenting the "alterity" of an observed community. During this project, I have tried to unsettle the observer's position through some artistic devices that deliberately over-elaborate the tools of the documentary process and tangentialise the institution. The Wildman costumes such as *Photographer (Wildman)* or *Sound Operator (Wildman)*, in their armour of cameras and microphones, flip the observational perspective and cast both the recording tools and the figure of the documenter into an extra-ordinary position. By exaggerating the apparatus of recording, the observer is no longer a neutral presence and the documenter is transformed into a performative, folkloric figure in their own right. Similarly, the screams that punctuate the video works *The Sound of the Cultural Office Gießen* and *The Sound of the Cultural Office Seinäjoki* present the administrative staff of those institutions in an unconventional, performative state (discussed further in sections 4.5.4 and 6.6.3). By turning the mechanisms of documentation into an unwieldy disguise and pointing the lens at the institution itself, the project redirects the curious gaze back towards the artist and the institution, alongside the communities and folklore that is at the heart of the project. This shift in perspective repositions the art institution, the observer, and the artist, and includes them as subjects of enquiry.

2.3.3 Double othering

Another key element of Foster's critique was that one of the critical turning points in assuming an ethnographic mode of artistic practice was in dealing with alterity. This alterity is also a key point in many elements of folklore, especially the characters of the Wildman and other costumed traditions that I have focused on in this research. These are characters that are by definition alternate and their costumes and rituals mark them out as othered. Such traditions centre around the performance of this difference already as a custom, often on an annual basis. Bringing these alternate characters into an art context is, in one sense, emulating the othering that is already taking place at the centre of the traditions themselves.

This performative relationship with the "other" mirrors the

historical intersection of art and anthropology. As art historian Matthew Rampley points out, dealing with an alternative other has also been a deep source of motivation in Western art history, partly due to a search that for a long time preoccupied itself with the so-called "primitive" other in a search for sources and originality.[94] The history of anthropology shows similar concerns, but we have reached the point now, in light of the ethnographic turn, where Rampley suggests "an all-embracing ethnology of otherness" places a focus not on the original but on the aesthetics of the other itself.[95] What is new about recent generations of artistic practice after the ethnographic turn, is the borrowing of the frameworks of a scientific discipline for an aesthetic examination. By adopting and then destabilising these observational methods, it is possible to investigate cultural phenomena through creating a different quality and mode of artistic documentation.

2.3.4 Dialogical aesthetics vs. the avant garde

Developing alternative modes of cultural documentation inevitably reshapes the relationship between the artist and the social sphere. To frame this shift, Grant Kester has formulated a growing distinction in contemporary art between traditional avant-garde practice and new kinds of community discursive art.[96] His critique of the traditional avant garde centres on its emphasis on rupture, shock, and the authority of the artist, noting that this approach when applied to social conditions often leads to art that is isolated from the communities it seeks to address.[97] In contrast, Kester's concept of a new community discursive practice foregrounds dialogue, collaboration, and collective meaning-making. This kind of practice often takes place through conversation and exchange.[98] In these contexts, knowledge is produced collaboratively and there is less focus on the artwork as an autonomous object and more on its political positioning. These general divisions separate two contemporary art practices into clearly defined modes of working, a shift from the dominant models of twentieth-century Western art where the artist acts as an instigator and individual, to one where the artist becomes a facilitator of dialogue and social engagement.

Since the time that Kester identified these divisions, socially engaged and community-based practices have only become more established modes in contemporary art. His concept of "dialogical aesthetics" highlights the value of collaborative, socially engaged art that takes into account multiple voices in the

production of works that articulate the community politics of a particular social artistic engagement.[99] However, at the same time, the fictional and the imaginative artistic practices that are central to the artistic modes of my project have their roots in the contemporary art practices that can be recognised in Kester's categorisation of the traditional avant garde. My project therefore sits in an overlap between both of these modes in the production of exhibition projects. The modes of conversation and exchange through which I develop connections with communities of folklore practitioners in *The Scream of the Strawbear* and interested locals in *Wildness Makes This World,* for example, follow clear methods of socially engaged practice. The resulting exhibitions then involve a dual mode of production in combining the documentary, collaborative outcomes of these social interactions with my own fictional constructions. This approach allows me, as an artist, to engage in work as both an individual author of fictional and imaginative works and installations and as a negotiator and discursive practitioner, critically engaged with cultural practitioners and cultural groups.

2.3.5 One foot in the field of the real

This understanding of the transformative power of fictional, speculative, and imaginative modes of practice is explored in the concept of *fictioning* as a mode of artistic practice, a model formulated by artists and theorists David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan.[100] They recognise fictioning as existing in the "tension between modes of narration and play, and between modes that would be identified as producing truth or unconcealment and fiction or simulacra",[101] further arguing that reality is a human construction, sharing with fiction the quality of being fabricated. While this constructed quality is often politicised in wider public discourse, where the label of "fake news" is used to dismiss inconvenient truths, artistic practice offers a more productive way to engage with fabrication. Outside the gallery, the manipulation of fakes and fictions is used to deceive, especially in the political sphere. Within the artistic field, however, these fabrications can be transparently acknowledged and celebrated as experimental tools to imagine alternative possibilities.

In dealing with these social and mythical structures at the heart of folklore, it is the aesthetic qualities and materiality that is initially visible in the artworks I produce, but what people identify with in a more general sense are the more deeply rooted and universal themes of collective myth-making and participation. In my

works there are many created elements of folklore that make use of formal ritual structures, for example, or imagined versions of wild-men displayed in the style of a museum presentation.

Returning to Burrows and O'Sullivan, their understanding of mythopoesis, or the mode of fictioning through performance, represents a practical model for the presentation of these performative aesthetics of folk costumes, documentations, and museum artefacts that I make ready use of because, as they point out, fiction has one foot in the field of the real.[102] Fictioning can be about more than the imaginative, however; it can also be a practice that exposes how many forms of knowledge, including those that claim objectivity, are socially constructed through human conventions. By blurring real and invented folklore, it is possible to examine how communities and institutions build the narratives that dictate what we accept as real, authentic, or culturally valuable.

2.4 From appropriation to hermeneutics; methods and artistic contexts

2.4.1 Strategies of appropriation

Many contemporary artistic practices have methods of appropriation at their heart, making use of material from other fields. In fact, it would be hard to think of an artistic practice that operates completely in a bubble, without the influence of any another cultural framework. Engaging in appropriation involves the borrowing of ideas, motifs, plots, technical devices, and many other elements from other artists and fields. Appropriation in art practice touches at its core on questions of originality and authenticity and is a key characteristic of modernist practices that question the nature of art itself,[103] with Schneider even placing art practice that draws from the cultural other as perhaps a "defining characteristic"[104] of twentieth-century art practice, where conventions of appropriation or "re-discovery" developed in parallel with a growing understanding of the political and ethical connotations of such work.

Appropriation, then, is at the heart of the kind of modernist artistic practice that developed over the course of the twentieth century. These practices were fueled by the European modernist ideal of the artist as a genius hero or discoverer, pushing them to the point where they became almost commonplace and unremarkable as a technique.[105] We are now at the point where unpacking these discovery myths and re-examining what is involved in appropriation

as artistic practice has been an ongoing process for several generations and an understanding of what the limits of appropriation are in contemporary art practice is becoming clearer. In contemporary art practice now, appropriation is often a self-consciously framed gesture, encompasing a wide range of techniques and disciplines.[106]

It is no surprise that since the 1990s, and the turn towards the ethnographic in art practices, appropriation that involves cultural materials has been called into question. It can, in some cases, be viewed as exploitative and this has been due to deep cultural shifts in the political understanding of what it means to work with cultural practices as a visual artist. Practices that raise the possibility of cultural appropriation firstly invoke the question of whether or not an artist has somehow misled an audience, because they pass off *as their own*, cultural materials from a culture they do not belong to. Secondly, it questions whether they are making use of cultural materials in an *inappropriate* way, due to their meaning, status, symbolism, or any other quality relating to the culture that the materials have come from.

The original definition of appropriation is contained in its roots in designating the transfer of property (ap-PROP-riation), originally referring to transferring something into one's ownership. This is still the case, whether the appropriation is in the name of an individual, or an institution such as the state, and could be applied to land or other kinds of property. Other definitions of appropriation relate to this original understanding across a wide spectrum. Knowledge appropriation, for example, describes the process of constructing a knowledge framework from many sources, according to one's own pre-existing context. In a literary sense, appropriation is a process where source material is transformed in a more decisive direction away from the informing source and into a wholly new cultural product or domain. In music, appropriation techniques, such as sampling, are often at the heart of contemporary music genres. In *Borrowed Power*, Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao emphasise that the wide spectrum of appropriation firstly concerns relationships among people, secondly that there is wide range of modes through which they occur, and thirdly that they are widely practiced.[107]

In contemporary art practice, appropriation as a practice in itself is a widely used visual art technique and refers to the practice of artists using pre-existing objects or images in their art with little transformation of the original, placing it alongside collage and ready-mades as a key skill in the development of modern

art practice.[108] In the New York art scene of the 1980s, so-called Appropriation Art centred on the practices of artists such as Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, among others, and their re-use of imagery and other visual materials as theorised by art critic and curator Douglas Crimp. In art historican Isabelle Graw's later 2004 essay "Fascination, Subversion and Dispossession in Appropriation Art", a reappraisal of the frames of reference for this appropriation art are drawn. Crimp's original critical distinctions between appropriations of style as positive, and appropriations of material as negative, are redressed as overly simplistic. Graw shows that critical distance was not always involved in the appropriation art movement, and questions involving the original source of artistic material naturally arose.[109]

However, when specific cultural materials are involved in the artistic process, there are a further set of critical boundaries to traverse. Against a social and media climate that can deal in cancel culture and social media outrage, understandings of cultural appropriation in the wider media often portray it as a uniformly offensive practice that is undertaken naïvely and without consideration for the cultural group or context that is misrepresented. Many examples relate to cases of cultural transgression in fancy dress costumes, textile print patterns, tattoos, and popular music, where there has clearly been some kind of cultural borrowing without permission. In general, there seems to be a common assumption in the media that the rules of cultural appropriation are clearly demarcated as a set of principles, where transgression always amounts to outrage and offence. However, for art practices sited in cultural fields, two dominant and contending premises of contemporary art practice – a focus on the cultural other and a practice of appropriation – come into sharper political focus. It therefore becomes increasingly important that artists acknowledge and feature the nature of the relationship with cultural otherness, showing that the sensitive nature of practice in these fields is understood and carefully navigated.

Developing an understanding of power in cultural relationships, group dymamics, cultural aesthetics, and where artistic and institutional responsibilities lie are the duty of the artist and institutions involved in working with cultural materials. It is nearly always the case that the institutions involved hold a position of power when it comes to funding – even in relationship to the artist – but this is only one element of a complex negotiation. What does the artist

ultimately want from the cultural group? Who is (able to be) asking the questions? Who manages the communication between the groups? These designations underlie the questions at stake for a visual artist. How to deal with questions of artistic authenticity and authorship? How to effectively include the cultural group or cultural materials involved? Making use of cultural material in the production of an artwork operates on the spectrum of authenticity that is reflected both in the name of the "other" culture and in the name of the artist, making it critical that these relationships are handled sensitively and openly in the production of works. Any preliminary discussion of how to manage the relationship between institution, cultural group, and artist should at least consider these and other related questions.

A recent working definition for cultural appropriation has been offered by political philosopher Patty Lenard. In understanding cultural appropriation as a mechanism, Lenard's definition clearly places the responsibility for cultural appropriation on the appropriator: "[cultural appropriation] is the deliberate use of a cultural practice or symbol from others and adopting it as one's own, where this use is contested".[110] Lenard supplements this definition with important "amplifiers", factors that intensify the process of cultural appropriation; namely, an unequal power relationship and profiting from the relationship. While unequal power relationships may emerge in many ways, the cultural and institutional framework in which an artwork is presented serves as the key site where these relationships are negotiated – whether they are visible in the final setting of the work or not.

In contemporary art settings, it seems clear to me that I am the one who has the responsibility to be the most knowledgeable and familiar with how my work is presented, and so it is up to me to ensure that cultural materials are handled in a sensitive and informed way. It may at first seem like a given, but as the artist, I have the responsibility for presenting the works and the position I take aims to corroborate and support the position of the cultural group, rather than critique or marginalise. Likewise, in the case of cultural materials that are part of works that are sold, I also have an obligation to negotiate and inform my cultural collaborators as part of our relationship, thereby ensuring that the terms of an artwork that might be sold are clear. Because profit might also be defined in other ways for me, such as reputation or exposure, these are also considerations that I should discuss with a cultural

collaborator beforehand. What are the terms of the exposure from an exhibition? On what terms might the works be contextually presented? These are topics that can already be predicted, and which should therefore be part of any discussion within our working relationship over the course of the project.

Engaging in these kinds of conversations helps prevent the kinds of conflicts that often surround cultural recontextualisations. As Lenard also points out, those being appropriated from should not always have to be the ones who bring it to people's attention. However, when cultural appropriation has had a negative effect, a wider understanding of it does come through meaningful contestation over time, by multiple members of the culture or their allies, if culturally specific explanations are at the heart of the dispute.[111] Obviously these discussions are not easy to manage in a crowded public discourse, but deeper understanding of the issues involved requires a wider ranging discussion over time and through various forms of media. Perhaps a more accurate term to describe instances when artworks mishandle cultural materials would be Rebecca Tuvel's reframing of cultural appropriation as *cultural misappropriation*. This repositions the cultural transgression on the misuse of the process of appropriation, rather than on appropriation as a technique in itself.[112] It allows for positive and negative applications of appropriation-as-artwork, and places the responsibility and skill of the artist as the key to the execution of successful work.

2.4.2 The careful partial participant

It is important to understand your own cultural competence and weaknesses as a practicing artist. My first degree in cultural psychology, and this early grounding, combined with engaging in European traditions as a Pākehā artist based in Berlin, demands a continuous self-awareness of what I carry as both a visitor and a participant.

Like the stranger, who, in Simmel's view, operates as a trader, an essential element of the psycho-cultural milieu,[113] an awareness of what you carry as the visitor and how that paradoxically might mean that you are also an insider some of the time, is an essential beginning to developing a cultural relationship. In recognising these outsider or insider moments (or even the times when I am both at once) it becomes possible to begin to critically position myself as an artist working in the cultural field. Obviously, this positioning requires a great deal of care and awareness of your

own experience and responsibilities. Taking an artistic position as an outsider, who to some degree also has some insider knowledge, evokes what relational ethnographers Camilla Brattland, Britt Kramvig, and Helen Verran term the 'careful partial participant', a stance defined by participating with care, beyond mere observation, within an ethnological context.[114]

These positions mirror James O. Young's method of defining the process of cultural appropriation. Cultures are complicated and fluid, seldom static in their nature; and so, many members of a culture can inhabit the roles of insider and outsider at the same time.[115] Young's main argument is that cultural appropriation is "important to the flourishing of arts in the contemporary world", recognising it as a widespread process, not only in the visual arts.[116] His discussion of the role of aesthetics in appropropriation is an unexpected starting point that much of the other discourse overlooks, addressing *how* it is that artists appropriate styles and artistic content from other cultures. Ultimately, the resulting artworks depend greatly on the context of their production.

In visual art, this concentration on the aesthetic quality of a work is likely to be the primary point at which to begin the discussion. It lays out the fundamental material in question, and the point to which a process of understanding the cultural context of the work might begin. Conversely, if an artist, as outsider, badly appropriates the style of a cultural insider, then the "aesthetic rubbish" that is produced would give an audience a false picture of the insider's culture.[117]

Minority and indigenous cultures who are already at a disadvantage could understandably find it offensive to have their culture subjected to misinterpretation by a cultural outsider. This process is what legal scholars Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao describe as "cultural degradation", where cultural materials are weakened and even destroyed by misrepresentation.[118] What is interesting for the case of contemporary art, as philosopher Alexus McLeod pointed out in an *ARTFORUM* roundtable discussion on cultural appropriation in 2017, is that what often appears as an objection due to cultural appropriation on moral grounds, is often actually an objection on aesthetic grounds.[119] Art can be unsuccessful because the process of appropriation in its production was badly and insensitively executed. However, there are limits to this focus on aesthetic success, as it obviously does not hold when dealing with Indigenous and other marginalised culture and heritage. For many Indigenous communities negotiating

intellectual and cultural ownership, any unauthorised appropriation is a direct infringement of their rights, regardless of the quality of the artistic outcome.[120] There clearly are limits to any assumption of how cultural materials can be creatively reused.

While contemporary art does not have any special status when it comes to concerns of cultural appropriation, it does have some advantages over other artistic disciplines such as music, design, or fashion, in its possibilities of contextualisation and framing. Artworks seldom exist in a vacuum where they remain without details of production close at hand and some kind of narrative of the artist's intent. In many cases artworks can self-consciously cite their cultural source material as an element of the works themselves, acknowledging their intertextuality. In my own works, as well as aesthetic re-framing and juxtaposition, I make use of titles and the formal descriptions of works in citing, referencing, and acknowledging source materials and collaborators. In a description of the works, there is a chance to answer the deceptively simple question of "What is it?"[121] I also try to offer a comprehensive list of acknowledgements of those involved in the production in exhibition materials, whenever it is appropriate to do so, as part of providing evidence to an audience that the work was produced within a framework of positive and engaged relationships. If it is possible to believe that an audience is engaged with the works, making use of the skills of questioning and enquiry, then presenting this information is a kind of reaching out across the contextual framing of the works in order to elaborate on their production.

2.4.3 Places of belonging

Another perspective in understanding insider/outsider positionality when artists are working with cultural materials, could be found in paying attention to the *locations* that these dialogues take place in or from or through. In artistic practice, multiple localities are likely to be in play, "seen as a complex accretion of factors ranging from gender, language, class, and education to memories, routines, and visions".[122] An artist brings their experience, cultural background, and skills to the relationship with a cultural other, perhaps involving many people in many places at the same time. The complicated overlaps of artistic work across multiple intersecting localities highlights that cultural fields are seldom discrete, and as individuals, our place in the world is defined by these multiple fields from which we draw experience, inspiration, and meaning.

This recognition was highlighted in the methodology of curator Zasha Colah at the 13th Berlin Biennale (2025), where wall labels showed artists listed with name, date, and place of birth, and then a list of "Places of belonging", which for some artists included multiple specific localities, allowing for a richer and more diverse picture of the artist's field of communities to emerge. Juneja's term for this concept is "transculturality" or "transculturation (as it was termed in 1941 by the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz)". With this, she argues for an understanding of culture that, rather than seeing local or national cultures as monolithic, is continually formed through a series of negotiations and entanglements with other cultures.[123]

Rob Garret: *I think you can truthfully argue that the idea of making community and expressing diversity is a valuable thing. I think that it is. Particularly in a world that is growing tired of globalism, but also wary of nationalistic fragmentation, we need powerful skills and powerful social integration muscles in the diverse world. How do we do that? Encountering artistic voices is one of the ways we can tune ourselves into diversity. When we are encountering political voices, whether they're local or regional, when we are encountering ideological voices, it's less easy to tune ourselves in because we are kind of forced to have an opinion. With art, we aren't necessarily forced to have an opinion about the ideas. We may have an emotional response about whether we enjoy it or not, but I think art has a tactical value in giving us an opportunity to exercise our social integration muscles with relatively little risk to ourselves.*

Matthew: *[Laugh].*

Rob: *You know, we're not going to pull a hamstring.*

Artists therefore have the opportunity to build on, to problematise, and to question cultural difference within artworks themselves. While locality stands for roots and the site of memory and experience, it is also a "matrix for the comprehension of individual subjectivity"[124] and understanding the perspectives that an artist might

inhabit. The contemporary transcultural mobility of artists is what draws attention to these overlapping sites and experiences and is also what brings new opportunities for questioning and exploring their consequences. Tradition then becomes a site itself that offers a dynamic artistic agency. Artists play out a negotiation of identities, histories, and futures across localities, remaking an understanding of place and identity and regaining a sense of agency in which to dynamically navigate through fluid cultural landscapes.[125]

2.4.4 Dancing a double jig: Appropriation as a two-way process

Acknowledging the contextual changes necessary to interpret cultural materials and adapt it in new settings, Schneider also views artistic appropriation as a hermeneutic process.[126] Rather than an unbalanaced and one-sided extraction of motifs, a hermeneutic approach views appropriation as an ongoing act of translation and mutual interpretation. In this outlook, appropriation becomes a two-way process of giving and receiving, encompassing a dynamic range of relations.

In my own practice, the conversations held with cultural collaborators throughout the production process best illustrate this characteristic exchange, taking on central significance in the development of the work. A process of researching historical details, exchanging knowledge of traditions in other contexts, and sharing materials of production such as photographs and video material are all interpretive elements that negotiate the meaning that is produced between artist and practitioner. This collaborative process directly reflects the core philosophy of the Folk Union's recently published Charter.[127] By asserting that folk culture is a "cultural commons" rather than a commodity or private property, the Charter redefines artistic responsibility around transparency, open attribution, and shared authority. Adopting these principles transforms the artwork itself from a gesture of artistic capture into an active contribution to the commons itself.

2.5 Reflexive checkpoints and artistic relationships

2.5.1 Beginning with warm enthusiasm

It is important to maintain a self-reflexive mode of questioning as part of artistic research that is navigating the complexities of working with living traditions and historical materials. The following questions are formulated as checkpoints to ensure that the collaborative

process remains grounded in mutual respect, transparency, and a shared understanding of the artistic outcomes:[128]

Are you, the artist, wanted there?
Each project that I have worked on for this doctoral project has involved a collaboration of various kinds with specific local cultural practicioners and experts. Sometimes this entails beginning a conversation with a cultural group to see whether it would be possible for me to document and work artistically with them, elsewhere it is a question of access to museum collections, and in other cases it is on an individual level. What underlies all of these relationships is the importance of developing a sense of trust in clearly presenting what I do as an artist and this is carried out through conversations, questioning, and sharing experiences. On my side, warm enthusiam and interest in the other practicioner's activity is usually the starting point for these conversations. From their side, it is the opportunity to gain an understanding of what I do and that engaging with me will hopefully be a rewarding experience. For a cultural group, there is sometimes a sense of pleasure in sharing their tradition with an interested outsider. In many cases, I am the first artist to ask to present these cultural materials in an art context and so I am aware that the attention that this might bring has its own incentives and liabilities. While I am engaged in these conversations, there is also the question of the institutions that are involved, as they are also a major part of the relationships that develop, especially bringing their status and standing in the community in the process of working with others. Ultimately, it was imporant that the artworks produced were presented to these communities where they were made, at instutions that serve those communities.

What is the othering/alterity involved in this work and how is this framed in the final presentation?
Although I have expertise in working artistically with folklore, I do not always have expertise in the specific cultural context that I am working with, but for me, finding out more is a rewarding part of the artistic process. Each specific local tradition that I work with is extraordinary in its own way and therefore deeply worthy of attention. Often the cultural tradition in question already as a unique point of subversion contained within the tradition itself, sometimes carnavalesque and sometimes costumed spectacle. Traditions that I have worked with for this project, such as the *Strawbear* or

May Man, have unique symbolic meanings and functions within the communities they operate in, already separating them from universal and mainstream culture (including contemporary art). There is sometimes a danger that folklore can be sublimated into entertainment or spectacles that shear off its unique connections and meaning.[129] I try to work against this in my installations, aiming instead towards a considered and artistic kind of observational practice of the particularities of the traditions I work with. I want to provide opportunities for looking and appreciating the very specific settings and spectacles of folklore because it is these aesthetic connections of that make them unique.

Are the groups you are working with interested in contemporary art?

One characteristic of folklore is described by folklorist Dan Ben-Amos as "artistic communication in small groups",[130] recognising two core elements of folk culture: creative expression and community participation. These elements are central to what makes a particular folk tradition distinctive and an essentially creative, artistic practice. However, often, much of what folklorists themselves study is not considered artistic by those who produce it.[131] In my own recent projects, many of the folk practitioners I have worked with are also artists themselves and so the relationship that I develop is mutually creative. It is clear that folklore and contemporary art are separate settings, and it can't be assumed that participants or the group always understand the processes involved in producing an artwork for an exhibition in a contemporary art context, particularly as it is often not even clear to me what might be possible at the outset of the process. It then becomes important for me to be clear about what the processes might be in producing works and to negotiate and explain the concept and setting in which the works are presented.

At the beginning of the project, what can the groups you collaborate with know about how the work will be viewed or shared?

The relationship needs to be centred around process and possibility. At the centre of art practice is a willingness to be open to many options and so as an artistic expert, my responsibility is laying out the process and framework of how an exhibition might be developed to folklore groups and other partners in the process of making the exhibition. That would include the implications of sharing

and presenting materials in a contemporary art context, such as how the works might be labelled and credited, the kind of thinking that might go into presenting the works, something that might be quite different from a straight documentary approach for example. It is the artist's responsibility to ensure, as much as possible, that their artistic partners and collaborators understand the thinking behind the process so that a knowledge exchange has the chance to develop and proceed over the course of the project.

2.5.2 Strategies for artistic relational brokerage

Working with living traditions requires a balance between artistic freedom and cultural responsibility. To prevent the work from slipping into mis-appropriation, it is necessary to make the collaborative nature of the project explicit. This involves moving beyond documentation to ensure that the contributions of cultural groups, practitioners, and institutions are clearly signalled. The following principles serve as a framework for maintaining that transparency and ensuring the project remains a respectful exchange.

Positive Dialogue and Attribution:

- Seeking positive conversations and dialogue with collaborators to share knowledges and experiences.
- Ensuring the clear attribution of the roles of collaborating practitioners and groups in all project outcomes.

Contextual and Institutional Transparency:

- Checking that collaborating partners are comfortable with how they will be named and referenced in the project's contextual materials, titles, and statements.
- Discussing the responsibilities, details, and connotations of the artistic presentation leading to the presentation of the exhibition.
- Making use of titles, catalogues, and exhibition statements to share the nature of the collaborative exchanges.

Shared Knowledge and Public Engagement:

- Sharing, where appropriate, the materials that were created during the production of the exhibition with all involved parties.
- Including collaborators in the exhibition's public events, including artist talks, previews, and other relevant gatherings.

2.5.3 Artistic ignorances

The relationships that I have developed over the course of producing the exhibitions for this research have been fundamental to their presentation, and in many cases these relationships have continued long after the exhibition has come down. In each exbibition project, there were many parties involved and navigating the responsibilities I held as an artist was an important element of the production and working process. While the cultural performers, materials, and groups were all already independently active in their own fields, it was important to be able to navigate the change in context from something that might have been folklore or performance to that of something contained in an exhibition, produced by myself in a contemporary art context. As theorist and artist-researcher Michael Schwab has pointed out in a discussion on transdisciplinarity, acknowledging a knowing position of artistic ignorance is crucial to both the artistic and epistemic process.[132] In the cultural field, if we are able to know how to navigate towards learning and exchange with respect and openness, we have the chance for productive conversations to grow. Having considered processes in place at the beginning of a project for encountering the new things that we might learn along the way becomes a key artistic skill. Performance theorist Karmenlara Ely asks us to examine who we are ourselves in this process of artistic cultural collaboration by asking “Are we able to be beginners?”[133] By recognising the limitations of our cultural knowledge and the role we take on when requesting permission to work with material from another culture, we can acknowledge the differences in the fields we work in and not overlook the potential that these have to offer.

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77.

"THEY DO THIS EVERY YEAR" AND THE LOGIC OF ART AND FOLK ENTANGLE-MENT



3.1 Folk-like forms

3.1.1 A disguised artist procession

In 2009, during the year that I was artist in residence at the English Folk Dance and Song Society, at Cecil Sharp House in London, I organised a "disguised artists' procession" as a performance around the time of Halloween. I was interested in how artists were working with costumes as artworks and how others were engaging artistically with various elements of folklore and performance and so I invited a group of artist performers to participate in a simple performative procession. This was a chance to bring these costume pieces to a public sphere and come together as a group who were interested in the aesthetics of folk costume, ritual, and performance.

The event began at the top of Primrose Hill in Regent's Park, a site with expansive views over London. There were some short performances and then a procession continued down the hill as the sun was setting, walking in a single line along Regent's Park Road to Cecil Sharp House. The group of performers were at the front and a large audience followed, some of whom were also dressed in costumes. As we rounded a corner, I noticed that some women had opened the windows of their houses to watch. I overheard a brief snippet of conversation through the layers of bells and the material of the mask of the costume I was wearing, as *The Morris Bellman,* 2008 (**Img. 51**). One woman was telling the other, "They do this every year". Perhaps she had mistaken it for some other kind of procession, or maybe she imagined it had happened every year, but the way she had described with certainty that this was a recurring event, started me off on a long, personal process of reflecting on the spectacle and performance of the procession. I was interested in how audiences and observers of the spectacle of

50| A member of the Königsberg Traditionsverein and the Strawbear in Königsberg in 2019.

51| Performance as *The Morris Bellman* for the *Disguised Artists Procession* in Primrose Hill, London, in 2009.



folk rituals (or artistic events that resemble folk performances) make sense of what they are watching and where understandings of folklore events originate from.

The comment that "they do this every year" showed me that there was an immediate connection of our performance procession with something that was like a traditional folk ritual, such as an annual calendar custom. As an observer, she was filling in the gaps in her understanding by imagining that she knew what she was looking at. At the time I was pleased to notice this, as it connected with my developing practice of constructing folk-like performance pieces. I was beginning to realise that folk-like rituals can often suggest *authenticity-of-form*, even though they are newly created artworks, but despite being new and artistic in form, the event did happen in a very *real* kind of way.

Following the inaugural walk from Primrose Hill, the disguised artist procession became, for a while, an annual event. These processions centred on a group of artists that included Megan Broadmeadow, Tereza Bušková, Alex Merry, Michelle Woolley, Tim Johnson, Gery Georgieva, and others. As part of the procession, these often-playful performance works placed a fiction at the centre of the form that essentially had an authentic folk-like structure, occurring amongst a community at a certain time and place with participant observers and performative practitioners.

This performative approach, as a kind of performance fictioning, brings together established modes of existence with simulacrum and fictional experimentation.[134] What is possible through understanding this kind of artistic mode when applied to folk ritual, is a kind of speculation on how real folk rituals function. Understanding folk-like practices that contain both a sense of the fictional and the authentic provides a chance to view the elements of form, function, and aesthetic understanding as hybrid folk-like experiments.

3.1.2 Solidarity across time

At actual traditional folk rituals, in my experience, people observing and participating the events draw from personal and collective understandings of what might be occurring in the ritual. For instance, people might say, "This happens every year to mark the end (or beginning) of the season" as they are participating in the visual spectacle of a folk ritual. Like viewers of an artwork (such as a ritual folk-like procession), observers of a folk ritual can understand what it is that they are looking at on different levels and with various

layers of experience and knowledge. It might well be that the historical context of the ritual or custom is not of great importance; rather, the important thing might be that it happens on time and in good spirit every year, or that their link to the folk ritual is through family connections or other means. These ideas might be born out of childhood memories of observing or participating in folk rituals or an understanding of their significance to the place where they occur. People are often influenced by folk performances collected subconsciously from all varieties of media over a lifetime, together producing an impression of how an authentic folk tradition could be imagined.[135] There is often an instinctive feel of familiarity with a folk ritual through having seen something similar in photographs of past events and so there comes a chance to re-mediate it through making new photographs and videos at contemporary iterations of the same event, something that is only multiplied again through social and digital networks.

Participation by following or observing a small-scale folk ritual can often be as important as a deeper knowledge of the historical context or the social place of the ritual. These ritual events clearly provide for a community need to come together around shared experiences and in this sense they are politically signified. At the *Strawbear* in Königsberg, for example, I heard a mother telling her daughter that the *Strawbear* was chasing away that year's winter. I saw a father, who as a young boy had also been brought to watch the *Strawbear* by his own father, proud to bring his young son to observe it emerging from the barn. These kinds of real experiences are situated in being present and in the participation of ratifying the past. Connections that are formed by observing and participating are ongoing lineages where the real meaning of rituals in the



52| Community *May man* (*Maimann*) procession in Steinbrücken in 2019.

community reside. The re-versioning of the past forms a continuity with the present, re-endorsing a particular group's understanding of where and who they are.[136]

This annual repetition can be understood through cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han's idea that rituals function as "symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world".[137] In *The Disappearance of Rituals*, Han argues that rituals create an architecture of time as a way of "making time habitable" that provides stability against the constant flux of modern living.[138] Han contrasts the embodied nature of ritual, where people come together in physical proximity with modern digital cultures that produce communication but without community. The value for the participants in Königsberg or Steinbrücken is in coming together, marking time through an annual return, and in so doing, focusing on the mechanism of the strange disguise at the centre of the action.

Folklore's continuity with the past puts it in contrast with the quest for newness of contemporary culture. This replication of traditional practices each year, especially through annual rituals such as a mummers' play, or the procession of a Wildman, is one way that people bring multiple versions of the past into the present. Each annual version of a traditional event cannot be exactly the same as it always was, but these small changes as time passes are part of the process of the forming of traditions themselves and also what makes them authentic, rather than being simple re-performances of what has happened before.[139] In this way, traditions generate authentic meaning in the present through an interpretation of the past. The experience of either passive or active participation in traditional folk rituals that take place in the same places on the same dates each year, is an embodiment of a kind of hauntological mode.[140] Each year they are re-composed, allowing communities to inhabit the present as an encounter with the past. The subtle changes that develop each year produce a kind of living history whilst bringing continuity to the present. Folklore is therefore deeply involved in cultural memory and its links to place, the seasons, and a need for genuine connections.

Chloe Middleton-Metcalfe: *My understanding of folklore or tradition is that there has to be some sort of continuity. It really annoys me when people say, "Oh, you only have to do something twice and it is then a tradition". I feel that this really diminishes*

customs which have been passed down over hundreds of years. It takes a lot of will for individuals to invest the time to maintain customs or traditions which have been passed down to them. I am not denying that customs change, there is always change, even stone monuments erode with time. However, inter-generational continuity is central to making something traditional and not just cultural or artistic. Actually, I think it is quite self-centred to call something you created "folklore" just because it looks a bit, perhaps, pagan or rustic. Continuity should be embedded in our understanding of folk alongside the concept of "by and of or for the people". I think this understanding can diminish the importance of inter-generational transmission.

Traditional folk events in Europe that have survived over generations, continuing to transmit eccentric knowledge and wisdom as they are repeated over many years, gain layers of meaning through this repetition.[141] This is especially noticeable in the case of calendar customs, which are a marker in time, as well as in place, but the connection to the past sometimes produces the feeling that an annual folk ritual is occurring in a time out-of-time, as they are re-made as old but also contemporary each year. This re-iteration of an event on a yearly basis connects people to past versions of the event, whilst also anchoring them in the present moment, at a particular place and time of year. In doing so, the repetition of traditional folk practice establishes a continuing cycle that has the chance to connect generations together across time. Nick Granata, of the English band Shovel Dance Collective, recently defined the performance of folk songs as an "act of solidarity across time",[142] aptly pointing out a connection to the present from those who have sung the same songs in the past, while also accounting for those who will sing in the future. The ongoing cycle of traditional customs, whether on an annual basis in calendar customs, or simply through re-performing traditional folk dances, music, and songs, still relies, though, on "past-ness" as one essential element of what gives them meaning and value.[143]



53| F. G. Ålander, *Haymaking*, c. 1912, Observations No 2 from the series *Valistus Primary School Observation Charts (Valistuksen alak. havaintokuvia)*, wooden teaching display poster and stand.

3.1.3 Urban nostalgia for the certainty of the past

The mere perception of this quality of past-ness of a folk ritual, as opposed to knowing specific historic details, is often enough

to contribute to a feeling that it seems authentic. Given this, folklore often calls on nostalgic emotions because seeking the certainties of past traditions is one way of making sense of the constant change and un-connectedness that we live with, in the contemporary world.[144] Especially for those of us who are living in cities, connections to seasons and land and the particular agricultural cycles of the past seem far away in both time and place. This desire for temporal solidarity is often heightened by a physical and psychological disconnect from the land, leading to a specific type of urban nostalgia for the certainty of the past.

Lally Macbeth: *With the work at the Stone Club, something that gets reflected a lot is people feel that visiting ancient sites is giving them an authentic experience of what it means to be British or what our culture is. So, it's a lot to do with that. It's funny because I keep thinking, "Oh, when is it going to die down?" And it kind of goes a bit more, and people just get more interested. I think there is a slight dip at the moment, but I'm sure there will be a moment where people are like [laughs], "Can we all go back to being the weirdo in the corner again?" But I definitely think authenticity is a large part of it.*

Matthew: *Yeah. I also think that a large part of it is that a lot of folklore comes from the countryside, and people who live in cities have this disconnect from the rituals.*

Lally: *That's definitely true. I think people living in cities are certainly kind of… I mean, there was the huge mass exodus during the pandemic to places like Cornwall and, you know, various other places around the UK. Wales did very well [laughs]. But I think there is definitely that aspect of people searching for something.*

3.2 Folk logics

3.2.1 From wondertales to modernity

Folklore events that are clustered around critical events in the calendar and human life cycles make use of symbols and gestures that

ground current events in the continuity of past actions. They also reveal that such events are and have been important coordinates of anxiety and relief for communities, soothing – through participation and collective action – important points in the calendar and in community lives.[145] Like the genre of folktales that deal in fantasy and symbolic magic that are termed "wondertales", the wider field of folklore is a realm of wonder, fantasy, and spectacle, with multiple layers of meaning that are in turn accessible to children and adults, and those culturally connected.

The wondertale emerged from a process of secularisation of the miraculous and the transformation of pagan beliefs. Through the processes of modernity, wonder became an object that could be possessed, rather than a system of logic or "knowing and being in the world".[146] Folk rituals and customs take us back to a system of knowing and being in the world that integrate symbolic and magical thinking can reveal much about what is valuable to a culture and what lies underneath.[147] It is a way of knowing things that is validated through traditional knowledge and other intangible connections.

3.2.2 Eccentric knowledge and practical obsolescence

Traditional community folk rituals can sometimes appear strange to an audience that is unfamiliar with the meaning of the ritual or tradition that is occurring, but folk traditions themselves have often gone through a process of estrangement, an unmooring from their original practical purpose, as the original meaning of the ritual or custom is lost. This misplaced meaning over time sometimes has the effect of creating space for other meanings to be imagined, often becoming part of the draw of the ritual, as there is a sense of mystery at the core of the tradition. At other times it can be the result of becoming too large and successful for the community that originally hosted the event, which can in turn result in a commercialisation of tradition, adding a further layer of distance from the original.

Many folk traditions are based on rituals whose meanings once made practical sense but are obscure in the present because technology and modern life has made the original function of the ritual obsolete. Historian Eric Hobsbawm points out in *The Invention of Tradition* that in this process of losing the practical element of a tradition or ritual, something symbolic can be gained.[148] A change to the ritual symbolism through practical obsolescence can add to the enigma of contemporary recurrences of folk rituals, even enhancing their appeal to a community who come to observe and participate

on an annual basis. The eccentric knowledge required to participate, being at the right place at the right time, only surrounds the mysterious sense at the heart of the ritual.

Axel Hoedt: *When we spoke before about the Strawbear, I told you about the village where they've strapped the Strawbear in and whipped him through the village. By the time the Strawbear was finished, he was already completely liquored. So it was rather difficult, because he couldn't get out of the costume anymore. They celebrated all afternoon, and I think we shot photographs there. They made a few processions through the village. We packed up and got into the car, left the village, and we just saw them in the headlights of the car making their last tour around the village. But the bottom line was, the village was so small that there were no bystanders anymore [laughs]. So they're doing it purely for themselves and for no one else. That's what I found really impressive. I feel like, okay, here now we're coming to the actual backbone for me of a tradition. You're not doing it for someone else. You're doing it for yourself.*

3.3 Folk manias

3.3.1 Folklore is revived

In different social and geographical contexts, folklore has different definitions, but the romantic idea of folklore originally began to emerge in Europe as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth century. It was at this point that the construction of the idea of folklore began to inhabit a separate residual space in culture. In parallel with the developing field of anthropology, which was applied to many colonial contexts across the world, the study of folklore in Europe turned to look at cultural practices in its own contexts. It was during this time that countryside, village, and agricultural traditions began to be connected to the past and a time before encroaching modernity. The "mass production of tradition" and the codification of folklore as national heritage began to appear across many newly formed institutes and museums.[149] The longing for an escape from



54| Richard Andree, title page, Braunschweiger Volkskunde (Friedrich Vieweg & Sohn, 1901).

the rush of modernity allowed for many of these kinds of thoughts about folklore to be developed around the turn of the twentieth century, as the idea of what folklore meant across Europe was being invented by those in both academic and amateur societies.[150]

Across all layers of society, social groups were formed in a kind of "folk-mania", with these groups beginning to contextualise and codify folklore along ideological frameworks, casting it as an authentic and romantic alternative to the processes of modernity.[151] This process encompassed the development of many societies, clubs, and festivals for performing and sharing folk traditions and customs such as songs, dances, and various traditional customs. The establishment of ethnographic, museological, and academic journals and research institutions produced collections of folklore on a mass scale, essentially establishing the forms of folk cultural heritage from scratch. In England, for example, the establishment of the Folklore Society (1878), the Folk-Song Society (1898), and the English Folk Dance Society (1911) coincided with conceptions about cultural evolutionism, survivalism, pagan origins, "lost-in-the-mists-of-time-ness" and "merrie-Englandism", a kind of nostalgic and utopian dream of what English culture was that held during the Victorian era.[152]

3.3.2 Survival concepts

Central to this Victorian desire to collect and classify folklore was the assumption that these customs were dying remnants of an ancient past. In *The Imagined Village*, folklorist and cultural historian

Georgina Boyes sets out a history of this British folk revival, accounting for the phenomenon of the popularity of folklore in Britain in the twentieth century.[153] Importantly, the "survival concept" originated with a belief that forgotten corners of the countryside contained pockets of folksongs, rituals, and customs that could be equated with societies in colonial contexts around the world at that time. The projection of these kinds of ideologies by amateur enthusiasts ensured that long-lasting belief in ancient fragments of folklore took hold. As Boyes points out, the survival concept often reflected the fantasies of amateur and armchair academics who were theorising by applying colonial ideologies, rather than drawing on fieldwork and the investigation of traditions.[154] It is still possible to identify the survival concept in the underlying plot of folk horror films, such as the 1973 cult hit *The Wickerman,*[155] and *Midsommar*, from 2019,[156] for example.

Another visible remnant of how folklore developed across European contexts is in its framing of eighteenth-century romantic ideals in how it was popularised.[157] In this sense, German Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder's concept of folklore as "the soul of the people",[158] a flawed notion that helped project a unified national identity, profoundly shaped the development of folklore throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The emotional appeal of romanticism meant that peasant traditions were favoured over factory workers and the spiritual superiority and innocence of country traditions and so-called organic communities was deeply ingrained in the essence of the folk revival.[159] The revival of folk traditions offered a model not simply of the world as it was, but the world as a kind of utopian projection into the present and the future.

In Finland, the development of a literary approach to folklore studies as a celebration of national cultural identity in the nineteenth century was anchored in the *Kalevala*, a formative document of Finnish culture, an epic poem compiled by Elias Lönnrot and first published in 1835.[160] Especially connected to Finnish language, the poetry serves as a mytho-historical basis for understanding Finnish folklore, drawing from collected oral traditions. Folk traditions in Finland over the course of the twentieth century became integrated into national education curricula, and a certain kind of national (but not necessarily nationalist) folklore became well known.[161] Finland was urbanised and industrialised much later than many other European countries and so this story of mythic origins in antiquity enabled the folklore discipline in Finland to develop in parallel with

modernity, at the same time integrating folk traditions into Finnish education and culture and the conceptualisation of a modern Finnish folk culture.

3.3.3 Everyday folklores

Artistically, I have traced Finnish traditions that closely resemble the Wildman ritual customs I have been exploring in other contexts in Britain and Germany. One example is the *Nuuttipukki* tradition, which is a masked house-calling ritual that now occasionally takes place today in Western Finland as a type of masked folk ball.

When I first visited Finland and talked about folklore with artists and researchers, I learned about this tradition from folklore archives at the University of Turku. As I spent more time in Finland, I realised that folklore plays a significant role in education and also in everyday life, with many customs, for example, related to sauna practices or midsummer celebrations. Perhaps this presence in the everyday is not even surprising, given that Finnish folk religion has played a significant role in everyday life, particularly in the countryside, and influenced belief well into the twentieth century.[162] This continuity was underscored in conversation with historical archaeologist Dr Sonja Hukantaival, who noted that foundational concepts of Finnish folk belief – most notably vernacular understandings of 'luck' – remained actively embedded across Finnish society until only a few decades ago.[163] Understanding 'luck' as an active, material force within living memory, is one point of view in my own practice as it allows vernacular objects and rituals to be re-framed as active and living methodologies.

Discovering folk traditions through conversations with other artists and people that I come into contact with feels different



55| Production still from *Nuuttipukki*, 2013, digital video, 8 min.

to the kind of research that is possible online, and in the library and archive. If it is possible to find a common language, in speaking with people there is a chance to understand their personal connections to traditions, memories of experiencing folklore from their childhood, or how they accept or reject the validity of folklore in their lives. These personal interactions as conversations allow for a completely different level of understanding folklore's place in people's lives than researching in texts or archives, for example. The grand narrative of building a national Finnish identity that has contributed to the rich documentation of Finnish folk tradition across the last century can appear distant and almost unrelated when people speak about their own personal memories and local experiences.

3.4 Authenticity, the fictional, and the fake

3.4.1 The dichotomous construct

Over time, the emphasis on authenticity of origin in the study of folklore has shifted, acknowledging the wider dissemination of folklore in culture, towards focusing on authenticity of practice, a shift that recognises the quality of experience of folklore as an essential element of what makes it valid.[164] In addition, Bendix points out that the notion of authenticity that was central to the development of folklore over much of the twentieth century also implies the existence of its opposite, the fictional and the fake and that "this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic".[165] Art practice that entangles itself with folklore only highlights this further, as the notion of authenticity and fiction at the heart of both disciplines is unpicked.

If authenticity has been such a central but elusive concept for folklore over time, it is also a slippery conceptual framework in the Western contemporary art context for both artists and audiences. It can firstly exist in an understanding that an artist has produced the concept of the work by authentic means, but also in that the materiality of the works is considered authentic in relation to this conceptual expression. As a specific quality of artistic works, authenticity is a dynamic and fluid concept because artworks are also dealing with fiction and creative uses of truth. This means that judging how authenticity functions artistically is a multi-layered process, shaped by various factors, including how the artist has engaged with the core subject of the works, its work's contextual presentation, and on top of all that, the viewer's interpretation of the works.

To evaluate questions of authenticity and originality is inevitably to invoke the Benjaminian concept of *aura*.[166] And bound up with this is the question of how an artwork authenticates its own status as art. The seemingly authentic and genuine status of folklore may contribute to its appeal in contemporary art, but this authenticity is always mediated by the context of display and the how the artwork is framed by the artist and the institution.

3.4.2 Authenticity by proxy

The Swiss commercial gallerist Bruno Bischofberger has a long-running series of advertisements for his eponymous gallery that all feature images of Swiss traditional life and have been published in prominent art magazines like *Artforum* and *Kunstbulletin* since 1987. In a 2018 publication,[167] these advertisements were collected together, establishing a connection to traditional customs and rituals. These images appear unconnected to the gallery's programming, including the roster of significant artists they represent, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Andy Warhol, and Julian Schnabel, amongst many others. Art dealer Bruno Bischofberger has a PhD in Swiss folk art and a longstanding interest in collecting folk objects. Each advertisement essentially contains one archive image of traditional folklore set in an alpine or rural landscape, with the contextual details of the gallery's programme in bold lettering in the corner of the image.[168]

The advertisements engage in a form of "authenticity by proxy" by placing images of Swiss folk life adjacent to details of the gallery, suggesting an alternative and more mysterious approach to the art market. These images create a distinctive and recognisable brand identity for the gallery and link it to the parallel world of traditional culture and folklore. Perhaps Bischofberger, already an expert in folklore, recognised the resonance between folklore and the sense of strange wonder experienced in both cultural realms. The images serve as a kind of misdirection because while the gallery's programme focuses on contemporary art, they borrow the aesthetics of documentary and archival traditions from folklore to lend a layer of authenticity to upcoming exhibitions. This may have been the original intention, although linking imagery of Swiss traditional life to a highly commercial gallery programme creates a disconnection. The images, as advertisements, are stripped from their original context as records of folk rituals or customs and they also do not relate directly to the artworks they advertise, leaving them seemingly detached and appropriated. It is only in seeing them in



56| A page from Peter Fischli, Hilar Stadler, and Museum im Bellpark, eds., *147 Backcovers: Summer Fall Winter Spring*; Anzeigen Galerie Bischofberger (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2018).

a cohesive published archive of the thirty-one-year history of major shows at the gallery that the distinctiveness of the project comes through, offering an alternative to the seasonal global commercial art market in the form of a distinctive calendar of folklore.

3.5 Morris dancing and other rituals

3.5.1 Ritualised dance

Morris dancing is an English ritual folk dance, performed individually or by small groups of dancers. It didn't actually realise at the time that I began to practice morris dancing, but its form is related to English court and country dance figures. Its style, however, is danced in a way that is much more energetic and ritualised. It also has a strong element of humour, and this perhaps comes from its origins as courtly entertainment and as part of carnivalesque celebrations, recorded as early as the fifteenth century.[169] In a conversation with artist and critic Tessa Laird, as I prepared for my exhibition at Kunsthalle Giessen, I outlined what drew me to morris dancing in the first place: "In transforming itself to become more of a dance of the people, I recognise a kind of raucous essence that morris dancing [has now] inherited."[170] Most dances are based on choreographed dance figures recorded around the turn of the twentieth century and traditions are linked to specific villages from all over England. Costumes vary amongst dance sides and styles, but nearly all morris dancers wear bells just below their knees and make use of handkerchiefs or sticks as part of their dance.

The costumes that we wore in Green Man Morris included our tatters (shirts decorated with ripped strips of material) over the top of trousers with bell pads below our knees. We also painted our faces green. This element of disguise was initially a central part of what made it seem possible to us to perform these dances in public in the first place. Making our own costumes and props were an important element of the time we spent together and we enjoyed the chance to re-invent the traditions that we were working with, toying with updating them for the context that we were performing in, which was Aotearoa New Zealand, a country on the other side of the world from where these traditions had first been recorded.

As I was becoming a morris dancer in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in the 1990s, I wondered about the dominant themes of emerging post-colonial discourse that I was absorbing whilst studying undergraduate cultural psychology at the University of Auckland. I was learning that the cultural traditions we were performing were those of English working-class agricultural workers. It was not until later, when I was living in Britain, that I better understood the traces of the class system apparent in these traditions. The reason that folk song and dance collector Cecil Sharp, the central figure of the modern English folk revival, first encountered the morris dancers in Headington Quarry at Christmas in 1899 was primarily because they were agricultural workers out trying to collect some extra money for their performances during a winter holiday season. This meeting with Sharp set in place the resulting development of folklore studies in Britain and eventually the class shift of the British Folk revival over the course of the twentieth century.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there had been some form of morris or English folk dance performed throughout the twentieth century, but we instinctively felt that these working-class roots were an important part of what it was that we were performing. Performing these dances felt legitimately counter-cultural, and we revelled in their dislocated strangeness. While post-colonial discourse was there in the background of my university studies as a framework, it did not occur to me at the time that this could have once been a marginalised practice; at the time, we were celebrating the sheer eccentricity of a tradition so far removed from its hyper-local English origins.

3.5.2 Artistic communication in small groups

This active renegotiation of traditional forms demonstrates how folklore functions through immediate, small-scale social interaction. In

his work on vernacular art and performance, folklorist Gerald Pocius observes out that art has always been an important element of folklore and remains a defining criterion, as in Ben-Amos's "artistic communication in small groups".[171] To this extent, there is an amount of freedom in the practice of traditions that allows for creative input from participants. Whilst balancing the needs and responsibilities of traditional practice, this creative impulse is an important element of how the social function of groups such as Green Man Morris, Boss Morris in Stroud, and the firemen who organise the *May Man* traditions in Steinbrucken and Rittershausen or the *Strawbear* organised by the Königsberg Traditionsverein function.

Matthew: *… that is the brilliant thing about masks, the transmogrification that they can offer…*

Alex Merry: *Yes, totally. I think that's why we went so crazy on the masks and makeup. It's so transformative, you can enter this different space. It's been so good. The fact that we are doing something slightly different makes us attractive for people to join, and it's highly eccentric. We get to experience all kinds of things that you couldn't dream up. I think that really appeals to people and has really driven the group forward. Once you get a taste for that, it's really good for the soul and just being in a collective. We are good for each other.*

Actually, a lot of the Boss Girls met – do you remember I used to work for Damien Hirst? He is based in Stroud and a lot of the other girls have worked for him as well – in this starchy, uber-strict setting; we were factory workers basically. We were all friends through that. I know a lot of girls through working side by side with painting spots, you know…

Matthew: *So quite a lot of you were artists already?*

Alex: *Most of us. If they are not artists, then crafters… There are some serious knitters or crocheters.*

Matthew: *Yes, you can really see that in the way that the costumes have come about.*

Alex: *Yeah, they are totally at the heart of it. If we get an idea to make something, you can see everyone's hands twitching already wanting to get stuck in. It's really exciting being part of that. You can just dream up an idea and you can really make it happen, and everybody loves that. We change kit often, and I think it's that feeling of wanting to make more and not settling with one kit, trying different things out. I think the Hirst experience for a lot of us was really detached from what you are making. You are told, you don't own what you are doing. For a lot of us, our creativity in our day jobs was really demoralising, so when it comes to something like this, there is endless energy for different things we can look at.*

It's totally collaborative. There is no hierarchy in Boss Morris. It can be shambolic at times, and it's not ordered. We don't plan things – well, we have grand plans, but it's always a last-minute scramble to do things.

I actually had no idea what it was that I was opening myself up to when I went to morris practice in Auckland for the first time. Learning dances with such specific steps and movements with a group of enthusiastic men was at the very least intriguing, if not difficult to get the hang of and physically quite demanding. Green Man Morris was a small group of male morris dancers, and as young male dancers relatively new to English folk traditions in a New Zealand setting, it felt as if we were engaging in a rare and enchanting tradition. This gendered practice in folklore has been something that I found personally quite remarkable as there are not really many social situations where men dance together. Later, I encouraged some of my friends to join too. Before long, we at least had enough dancers to form a side and to dance in public, in the real world.

Another thing that we were not really thinking about at the time was that the use of costume, masks, and exaggerated ritual gestures all contribute to a folk construction of performed masculinity, one that is stylised, codified, and stands apart from more familiar forms of masculinity in contemporary society. The social character, costumes, and distinct physicality of all-female dance sides bring their own unique performative qualities to the stage. Yet these spaces operate within a long and complicated history of gender

divisions in traditional folk practices. These gender divisions though are navigating cultural shifts that reflect wider social changes. Artist Lucy Wright addresses this changing landscape in her 2021 manifesto "Folk is a Feminist Issue",[172] arguing for diversity, inclusivity, and a critical re-evaluation of gender norms in folk practices across the board. In this modern context, teams like Boss Morris are actively subverting gendered traditions, turning all-female performances into a site of feminist and artistic agency.

On reflection, I realise though that my interest in folklore continued to follow some kinds of gendered traditions, as I encountered more and more Wildman traditions in Europe. Here, the performance of masculinity shifts from a social grouping to a disruptive wildness. As a field where masculinity is performed in often outrageous ways, including in carnivalesque gender inversions, folklore seems to have a specific and unmodern character of masculinity that is not always in sync with contemporary norms. Even in the twenty-first century, these kinds of transgressions enact a version of caricatured masculinity, in ways that don't always reconcile with contemporary accepted gender standards.

3.5.3 Small-scale folklore and DIY

Artistically, my focus on folklore has also been to situate myself in and alongside folk traditions at a common, small scale, and grassroots level. This relationship has changed over time as my mode has developed through my practice, first as dancer and mummer, then as artist, now as artist researcher. From my point of view, the best kinds of rituals and traditions are those that are not institutionalised, sponsored, or operating on a grand scale, because as a folk dancer myself, this was always my experience, operating in a small group at a level that meant it was possible to organise everything amongst ourselves. This means that I am collaborating with similar groups of people who are able to do-it-themselves: constructing their own costumes, organising themselves into a functioning ritual, or executing a tradition by means of a domestically situated group. This kind of small-scale folklore offers an unpolished, amateur framework in which it is possible to understand that what is occurring is a performance and a custom – a living traditional ritual where people can recognise most of the community in which the tradition takes place.

Jack Duplock: *When I was a student, I spent four months in Greece over the Easter period. There was a lot of folk ritual and we got into this taverna, and the whole village was in it. It was a massive meal for the whole village. They were getting drunker and drunker. I couldn't remember what the characters were meant to be, but it was like a Guy Fawkes, with some connection to meat because this was before Lent. I think it was the weekend before Lent where you can just drink and eat as much as you like…*

Matthew: *Yes, that's the end.*

Jack: *Over the Lent period. It was a massive feast and a lot of booze. People were getting drunk and then dancing around this figure that was hanging from a tree or something. I think they even hit it at the end. As a 21-year-old, I'd never experienced this kind of thing, so it was quite an interesting experience, and the fact that a group of us could be involved. They invited us with open arms to be part of it.*

Matthew: *Great.*

Jack: *I suppose that's what you mean, a very localised festival. There's no commercialisation to it.*

Matthew: *Yes. That level is really something that I look for a lot because maybe it's just the scale, but I think the engagement is important for me, that I have a chance to speak to people about what they're doing. If it's such a large scale then it's beyond possibility to speak about what's happening. Also, the handmadeness or the craft of it at that scale. There's not millions of euros spent on parade floats and costumes. It's what people have…*

Jack: *Well, those big ones must have started on a small scale and now they've become…*

Matthew: *Famous.*

Jack: *And a tourist attraction, so their original meaning has disappeared because it's more of an organised event.*

Matthew: *Exactly.*

3.5.4 Once a year

Discovering the book *Once a Year* by photographer Homer Sykes on Andy Smith's bookshelf during a break in our morris dancing practice at his house in Auckland in 2000 was an important step into the wonder of British folk rituals and traditions. Sykes's text is a black-and-white photobook of documented calendar customs made in the 1970s.[173] The images present annually celebrated rituals from around Britain, including the Burryman, morris dancing traditions, mummers, and many other small-scale calendar customs and rituals. These images document the carrying out of these traditions with a wit and innocence that showcase them as almost mystical, dream-like events. We looked at the images in *Once a Year* as authentic documents of folk rituals with historic origins that we could not even begin to achieve in Auckland as we performed our versions of traditional morris and sword dances. However, in Green Man Morris, our own rituals and traditions evolved as we developed our practice and performances in other ways, although there was always the sense that the "real" traditions, such as those documented in *Once a Year*, were something we could never hope to achieve.

I asked Sykes about his book at the opening of the curated group show *Collective Observations: Folklore and Photography – from Benjamin Stone to Flickr*, which was held at Towner Eastbourne in 2012.[174] He told me that when he was taking the photographs for *Once a Year*, in the early 1970s, he was very often a lone photographer. It is almost incredible to hear this, as for some decades now it would not be possible to attend any of the events in Sykes's book and not be part of a large group of photographers following the action. Part of this is down to technological advances in cameras and digital media, but part of it is also due to the rise in popularity of these events, in part due to the influence of Sykes's images in the first place.

The events in *Once a Year* are annual customs, and this is why its images have become important documents as points of reference for how the rituals occurred in the past. Like the seminal



57| A page from Homer Sykes, *Once a Year: Some Traditional British Customs* (Gordon Fraser, 1977).

58| A signed Polaroid photograph of the Burryman in the South Queensferry Tesco supermarket in 2004.

black-and-white images we know from the art world of performance works and fluxus happenings of the same period, these images are also markers of traditions and rituals that took place away from large audiences. Their occurrences were inaccessible to many, and Sykes's images are now important historical records of how the rituals unfolded in a time before digital and social media became the norm.

One of the rituals documented in Sykes's book is *The Burryman*, showing the traditional Wildman procession that takes place around the village of South Queensferry in Edinburgh. In 2004, at the Burryman's procession, I asked the Burryman himself if his perambulation could be thought of as performance art. He answered that he felt its purpose was something more communal, historical, and perhaps even more serious than art. He was quite certain this was not performance art, but rather an obligatory ritual. I took this to mean that the Burryman's day was already collectively understood as an important ritual by the community, there were no artists involved (as artists), and that everyone felt that they were part of the ritual by watching and following the spectacle, collecting money for charity and joining in the Burryman's song as they went.

3.6 Art and folklore overlap; the familiar and the strange

3.6.1 Making sense and nonsense

I have realised that the creative mode of making-sense-of (and sometimes making-nonsense-of) that is part of folk expression has


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Low
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interesting parallels in the objectives of my artistic practice. Folk traditions are often aligned with making luck and linking this creative approach to marking place and building identity and community. Folklore as a mode of making sense of the world through customs and rituals is then artistically interesting because of its qualities of humanity and perceived authenticity, while at its core, often exuding a different kind of logic to the everyday:

1| Folk rituals can appear to be incongruous or immaterial to conventional rational thinking; that is, they might appear to have their own sets of logic that serve their ritual purpose.

2| Traditional customs and rituals are characterised by doing rather than thinking: their mode is performative.

3| The objectives of folk rituals are sometimes not always clear, or by far secondary to their collective participation and observation.

4| The aesthetics of folklore that include the home-made, can-do and self-made costumes and props.

These realisations about the overlapping intent of folklore and my artistic practice are not a new insight. Folklore's intersections with modern art practice are many and varied and can be traced back to the beginning of folklore as a discipline itself. The recognition that in folklore lies the kind of expression that links people to a kind of connective truth has been there from the beginnings of the avant garde. In the early twentieth century, many artists turned to folklore, often working directly with folk art techniques and crafts. Kazimir



59| Exhibition view of *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Gießen in 2019, showing *Dachschmuck*, n.d., two roof tiles associated with luck, one figure on each, plus a small animal figurine. Collection Oberhessisches Museum.

Malevich and a generation of artists in the 1920s recognised in folklore a conceptual and social function, often going as far as learning techniques from craft practitioners directly.[175] In Germany, *Der Blaue Reiter* almanac, published in 1912, showcased contemporary artworks alongside children's drawings, glass paintings, and Bavarian votive tablets. Artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, and Alexej von Jawlensky travelled to the countryside, as artists-as-folklorists, to collect "genuine" expressive folk artefacts. A generation of surrealists saw also in folklore a direct connection to the irrational and therefore access to the unconscious, although the specific context of the mythologies that they reference were not always as important as the idea that they might be able to access universal truths.[176] Each following generation of artists has had its own relationship with folklore and its methods, reflecting the flaws, concerns, and the specific focuses of the times they are working in. Contemporary art often tries to create worlds that exhibit a transgressive "alternative sense", and the escapist even salvational qualities of folklore promise this possibility.[177]

3.6.2 Deller and Kane's everyday archive

As a survey of contemporary popular cultural expression, *Folk Archive* (1999–2005) is an artwork by conceptual artists Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane that was widely exhibited in the early 2000s. Developed over the period when the Young British Artists (YBAs) were successfully examining cultural expression and incorporating elements of subcultures in their works, Deller and Kane presented one definition of what "folk art" could be in a wide-ranging collection of objects, artefacts, images, and videos. The exhibition provided multiple answers and showcased documents of traditional events alongside contemporary artefacts such as truck decorations, prison tattoos, hand-painted shop signs, and other objects of outsider vernacular art. Most of the collection of works contained in *Folk Archive* were contemporary at the time it was presented, rather than historical artefacts, and this quality is important to its relevance both as a contemporary artwork and as a recognition that folk as an ingredient of the "everyday" is, by its nature, contemporary and relevant.

The *Folk Archive* is mainly a survey of outsider art practices, including many things that would not be considered art by the people who had produced them. It takes the form of a survey-of-folklore-as-artwork, and it resonates with me as a framework of

artistic research in defining a field. The archive has a scope that is able to present a living framework of vernacular and folk-art practice as an exhibition, but also as a celebration of the kind of art practices that are not normally shown in contemporary art spaces.

Deller and Kane suggest in the preface to the catalogue accompanying *Folk Archive* that they hoped to question what might constitute modern-day folk art in light of a corporatised cultural world in the year 2000.[178] This acknowledges the artistic value of the objects in the show, placing folk art in an artistic space that bridges the gap between the modernist view of vernacular folk art as expressive but exotic and the capitalist world that is able to commoditise folk art objects as goods.[179] That this project was exhibited and presented in large institutional art spaces, such as the Barbican in London and Kunsthalle Basel in Switzerland, and not in historical museum spaces brought this implicit comparison of low and high art comparison into sharper focus. The process of presenting these examples of folk art echoes a longstanding tradition among European folklorists, who primarily focused on:



60| Exhibition view of *Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK*, produced by Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane at MK Gallery in 2005, showing Peter Clare, *Snowdrop the Mechanical Elephant*, 1990s.

> vernacular European versions of those products already singled out in the postmedieval West as exceptional: painting, sculpture, music, and literature (including narrative and poetry). There were folk parallels for high art: märchen for novels, wall paintings for gallery portraits, painted furniture and ironwork for sculpture, ballads for poetry.[180]

The political dimension of the process of showing work by prisoners, people experiencing homelessness, "bored teenagers", and other groups of people not usually invited to present works in large gallery spaces was clear. This importance of a contemporary understanding of the class element of what folk art might be was also highlighted in Jeremy Millar's catalogue essay,[181] where he points out that many histories and commentaries on folk art establish a distance from their working-class subject by consigning folk art to a historical examination. This had in turn freed established academic cultural theorists to invoke folk as "quaint or charming", rather than recognising its essential vitality, life, and necessary creative evolution as part of a contemporary understanding of popular creative expression.

The *Folk Archive* was produced around the time I was pursuing my MA in Fine Art Practice at Northumbria University in 2005. At that time I understood the importance of this work in

defining my own practice, not just through its significance as an artistic survey of folklore, but *aesthetically* as an invocation of the value of the vernacular popular and folk works contained within it and so I could also see the potential for some of the elements of my own folk practice as a morris dancer and mummer to gain agency as artworks. I began to realise that I was *both* a participant in the folk realm, as well as an artist working with it, and that my position was becoming clearer as an insider in both the field of folklore and the field of art.

3.6.3 Art that is beamed in

In my experience, the qualities of a certain kind of folk ritual and the best artworks are often the same. Firstly, they are able to offer the experience of being situated out of time and out of place, removing the viewer or participant from their normal state of existence and offering a new enchanted way of seeing the world. This is something almost alien, as Bruce Asbestos, who often comments on how he experiences art, suggested in a post on Facebook in 2019:

> Really great artworks, like the 0.1% of artworks I see, always have this feeling like they come from another planet, and have been beamed in. I've never mentioned that before, seems weird to say it out loud! 👽👽👽 [182]

These are rare qualities, but impossible to ignore or forget. They have the power to change how you see the world, to make the familiar new again. This power to change how you see the world means that there is often a simple ungraspable truth, mystery, and spectacle at the centre of the experience of both powerful folklore or artwork. For folklore, perhaps this has come from the transition of a traditional practice into a purely symbolic ritual or maybe it is simply the setting in which it takes place. When no practical use survives, folklore begins to approach the definitions of art that place it beyond the point of utility.[183]

3.6.4 Finding the unfamiliar in a familiar place

Experiencing folklore as an observer and as a participant can generate a feeling of being estranged in the sense that it is unfamiliar, it provides a disassociation from the present moment, often because it doesn't seem contemporary. The costumes or the performance

spectacle might create a unique setting in a familiar space – on the street or in a pub, for example – where the tradition or folklore is not an everyday occurrence. A similar kind of feeling of estrangement, I later recognised, is an important element of understanding how visual art can affect an audience. The concept of estrangement was developed by Russian formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique",[184] and later developed by Bertolt Brecht in the theatre context as *Verfremdungseffekt,* or defamiliarisation effect. Both are a literary theory of re-contextualising to allow distance and criticality. In visual art, the necessity of looking at an art object, in recognising it as a piece of art, necessarily requires attention and this process is core to understanding how the art object is pulled into becoming something strange. Bringing these parallel realisations of estrangement together from both the experience of folk rituals and the experience of an art context has been part of my process of working with folklore in an artistic setting. It has meant working with the condition and materials of folklore in the production of artworks, the unfamiliar in a familiar place, costumes and props constructed from everyday materials, and rituals that have symbolically lost their practical purpose, all in a way doubling the estrangement while also examining how it is framed historically in museum and institutional documentary practice.

Simon Costin: *It's always interesting talking to people as an outsider, coming to those traditions for the first time. Like in Ottery St. Mary with the barrel burning. They don't find it at all strange, even though quite young children are having their hair singed off the side of their heads, and it's fine.*

It's kind of like a rite of passage. But if you talk to them about rites of passage and all that, it kind of doesn't...

Matthew: *Doesn't make sense?*

Simon: *I kept being told, "You're reading too much into it. It's just what it is. It's just what it is." So you do have this tendency, if you have an interest in the subject, to add layer on layer of meaning because it's just a normal thing to do.*

3.6.5 The unworlds

While defamiliarisation relies on a shift in perception, cultural theorist Mark Fisher provides a framework for understanding the eerie atmospheric charge of these encounters. Fisher unpacks strangeness through his elaboration of the weird and the eerie, states that are not necessarily dealing with horror, but with unease alongside the uncanny. The weird, as Fisher describes it, is the intrusion of something that does not belong – a collision between the everyday and the "unworld".[185] It is felt when the boundaries between the human and something that is nonhuman are blurred, like the invocation of a mythic presence, producing a sense that something unknown is present. The eerie equally deals with the unknown but quantifies it as an absence, and a feeling of mystery. For Fisher, the weird is a mode of the unfamiliar in the domestic, and so when we experience a folk ritual as a folk-strange event, one way of understanding this is because something unfamiliar is occurring in an otherwise familiar environment. A suburban street in Königsberg, where the *Stohbär* shuffles around the corner in old metal chains for example, or the Tesco supermarket in South Queensferry where the Burryman poses for photographs in the chilled ready meals section create a visual shock, because these characters are wildmen, unusual in the everyday, and extra-ordinary because of this. These characters are also marked men, unfamiliar because the signifiers of the costumes and the carnivalesque context of their being in that place at that point in time are unreadable as contemporary or an any sense "normal". Are they historical? Are they re-enacting? It is often not clear, but the answer is that yes, they are historical and yes, they are also re-enacting.

Perhaps this strangeness has always occurred, even though there is a sense that at one time a Wildman on the street or in the supermarket was a "normal" occurrence. The annual repetition of folk customs has a particular role in the formation of cultural memory and there the qualities of folk-strangeness and distinctive symbolism come as no surprise.[186] Fisher's elaborations on the weird, the eerie, and the uncanny illuminate essential characteristics of how traditional folk rituals reveal affective power and social agency within the communities they take place in. By highlighting how these practices engage with the boundaries of the familiar, the intrusion of the outside, and the unsettling presence or absence of agency, Fisher's framework helps explain why folk rituals persist even as their original meanings are forgotten or suppressed.





61 | *The stone on Mauri's land that splits at Midsummer to release the devil*, 2020, digital print, 38.4 × 50.0 cm, for *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2020.

Folk rituals and mythologies often take place at liminal times such as at midnight, at the solstice, or on Midsummer and in particular spaces with a connection to history. These are locations and moments where the presence of the unseen, of what has happened before, is most keenly felt, and where agency is ambiguous. Does the recognition of the past act in the present there? At the large glacial stone on Mauri's land that was included in the exhibition of *Wildness Makes This World*, the knowledge that the mythical arrival of the devil on Midsummer's evening added another layer to the meaning, a myth that gave a particular aura to the place. This quality is fundamentally eerie, it arises from the sense of being watched or influenced by forces we cannot fully name, a feeling of unfamiliarity in the environment, and not being able to fully grasp the sensations of what is happening.

These modes of the weird, eerie, and uncanny that Fisher describes are, as characteristics of folk ritual, living encounters with the strange and ways of negotiating the boundaries between community and the outside, the living and the dead, the known and the unknown. Through these modes, folk rituals do more than preserve heritage or tradition, they connect communities to specific places, producing shared experiences of enchantment and strange wonder, which can be both unsettling and comforting. Producing and preserving a relationship with these kinds of unknown strangenesses allows each generation to renegotiate the boundaries that bind communities to forces beyond the everyday.

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180 Pocius quoted in Feintuch, *Eight Words*, 89.181 J. Millar, "Poets of Their Own Affairs", in Deller and Kane, *Folk Archive*.

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IV.

PERFORM-ING HUMOUR AND THE ART-FOLK-COMIC PUZZLE



4.1 Post-performance objects

4.1.1 Alicia Frankovich's wall labels

In the mid-2000s, I noticed a label for a series of artworks by the Aotearoa New Zealand performance and installation artist Alicia Frankovich at Stark White gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, and what caught my attention, was the description of the works as "post-performance objects". At the time, I didn't question this phrase as a standard descriptor for labelling work, but I later realised that it is not actually widely used at all. I imagine that the meaning that Frankovich had ascribed to the works was that they had been used like a prop or a piece of equipment in a live art performance work and their presence in a gallery space was evidential, primarily serving a function as sculpture. Understanding how performance-related objects are contextualised in an exhibition setting, especially as they are related to folklore, has become a question that I return to, re-stating it through various configurations of installations and exhibitions.

In October 2005, around the same time as I was beginning to think about post-performance objects, I saw the exhibition *PestKOP im Black Rebel Motorcycle Club* by John Bock at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin (**Img. 64**). Bock presented a series of objects, such as broken bottles, costumes, and other props, in the middle of a large gallery space that had one of its windows in a state of semi-repair. A video documentary of the performance filled in some of the gaps of how the objects had been used, showing that the performance began in the same space with an animated lecture involving milk bottles. Bock had then tumbled through the window into the museum café outside, before moving along the street, then ending in a spectacular fall from a bridge onto a passing boat, whereupon dancers popped up and accompanied the performance



62| Manar and Tuomas and their family in fancy dress costumes at the Pyhälahti Photography Studio Museum, Lapua, for *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2020.

63| Exhibition view of *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2020, showing a bear mask from the Seinäjoki Museum's collection.



64| Production still from *John Bock, PestKOP* im Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, 2005, shown in *Preis der Nationalgalerie für junge Kunst* at the Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart in 2005.

as the boat slowing moved into the distance. Bock's excited Dada-style presentation was visible on a small video screen in the centre of the room; it animated the collection of objects that were left over from the performance, clarifying a narrative of what the live audience could have experienced in the space.

In watching the performance video on the screen, it was possible to think about what could be learned from the objects that were left behind. These objects only told some of the story but were obviously important to the artwork (after it had been performed) because something had happened to them. It is the traces of performance that remain in the objects involved, such as the smashed window and broken bottles, that holds the possibility to imagine what had happened to them; for me, this also brought the realisation that these traces are signifiers of a past event.[187]

4.1.2 Past and present actions

Many of my works, which are costumes and other props related to folk performance, could be labelled post-performance objects. This obviously describes them as something that has been performed with at some point, but the term has artistic use in transferring the meaningful action of an object from the past, when the "performance" happened, to the present, when we encounter them. In other words, something is left over from a point and place in time that the viewing audience no longer has access to and so the rest of the elements of the performance have to be pieced together, or imagined by viewers.

This shift in the idea of action or performance from something that happens in view to something that has happened out of sight, leaves only evidence from which an audience has to construct and conceptualise a performative event. Museum objects similarly bring their own previous histories of use to their presentation in a museum, but they rely on the authentic labelling of the historical context of the object for an audience to read them. Artworks that were once performed with, however, are adding another contextual layer to their setting that does not conform to the historic standards found in museum labels. These objects have gained meaning through a deliberately performative artistic action and although a performer no longer animates them, their status as markers or witnesses to an action gives them a link that incorporates another time or place to their understanding as an artwork. This link to the past history of an artwork in an exhibition context is borrowing a museum-like contextualisation of the work, even in a situation where the performance was fictional. It gives space for an audience to imagine the context of the performance that the artwork might have been used in.

As I developed my own practice of sculptural installations that made use of costumes and the paraphernalia of folk ritual, I had, for a period, a self-imposed limitation of only exhibiting pieces that had previously been performed with. This was one step along the way in a slow transformation from a performance artist to a sculptural practitioner. Costume sculptures presented on mannequins freeze a performative act in the pose of the figure, for example, and artworks such as these, that make reference to performance, whether actual or fictional, labelled as such or not, have the potential to offer multiple possible imagined versions of what has taken place.

4.2 The instinct to perform and the art-folk-comic puzzle

4.2.1 Morris dancing as performative punk fantasy

My own understanding of what it means to perform developed through my experience as a performer in various folk-related traditions, such as mummers' plays and morris dancing. The key element of these kinds of performative folk traditions and something that continues to intrigue me as an artist, is how humour operates in such rituals and traditions. As a morris dancer and mummer,

humour is an essential characteristic of the performance, and audiences who are familiar with the traditions expect it. Sometimes the humour is a performance mechanism for engaging an audience and other times there is innate humour in elaborate costumes, in the breaking of social norms, or the raucous nature of performing.

Although they are separate traditions, both mummers' plays and morris dancing share strong satirical elements. Mummers' plays are flexible enough to often poke fun at contemporary political figures, whilst morris has its origins in pastiche. A further layer of humour is contained within the social group of performers themselves. Because folk traditions often have at their heart a ritualistic as well as a performative element, the audience for the folk custom are also often the participants too. Humour plays a role in connecting these participants to the tradition and the ritual act. It is a way of learning how to make sense of the need to relate not just to an audience but to each other when performing, taking in the logic of the ritual, including those parts that have lost their practical sense over the passage of time.

Matthew: *What's interesting for you, in thinking about folklore and tradition? I already see that on your website, you've got quite an amazing introductory statement.*[188] *It's really interesting, positioning yourself in this period of time at the end of the seventies with punk, and you draw this connection between morris dancing and punk, which is really cool. When I started morris dancing, it was the nineties, and it was me and my friends, and we were in New Zealand, so we were lacking context a little bit in terms of morris dancing. We just basically wanted to be in a punk band, but we weren't musicians. So, we saw ourselves as a band, but we're morris dancers. It's quite nice to read your introduction… [laughs].*

Faye Claridge: *Yeah. I was thinking about that in terms of my personal context, because I think there is something really interesting about my family's relationship with folk. We had a pretty standard suburban upbringing; two professional parents in a semi-detached house with a nice garden. Yet, I think that is the perfect context. That's where a lot of current folk does sit, actually. I was interested in why, and it's not as straightforward*

as escapism, but it's sort of choosing your fantasy village or your fantasy community almost, and making it real. I think that is quite a punk thing to do, saying that… but it's like a part-time thing.

This experience as a morris dancer and mummer, as an undergraduate student in Auckland, came well before the beginnings of my artistic practice. When I joined Green Man Morris in 1994, I was fresh to the world of folk tradition, ritual dance, and drama, and so learning Cotswold morris dancing and mummers' plays was a whole new world to me. The initial impulse to join was through a connection to an English man, Andrew Williams, a morris dancer and friend of my mother's. Green Man Morris had been created by Andrew Williams and Andy Smith, and practices took place in an old shop space on Khyber Pass in the city centre, next to a warehouse that Andy was living in during the early 1990s. He had a background in street performance, alternative "theatrical" organisations in New Zealand, such as the pacifist organisation Alf's Imperial Army, and was a member of the City of Auckland Morris Dancers. From both of these men, I learned much about tradition, costume, and performance.

As I began to learn the dances and traditions, I recognised the humour and the strangeness at their heart, but also the home-made and amateur qualities, features that fascinate me still now both artistically and practically. The advice given to me by Andrew Williams at one of those first practices that I attended in Auckland, was that "a morris dancer should never appear to touch the ground". This later became the title of a staged photograph I made years later in 2007, which was first presented on a billboard outside studios managed by Waygood Gallery in Newcastle upon Tyne **(Img. 65)**.

4.2.2 Translating traditional humour

Particularly as I was beginning to learn to morris dance in Auckland, these traditional dance customs, which were a little estranged in time and place, felt thrilling to perform, as if the performances were a complex and mystical comic puzzle. We were happy to perform our versions of these folk traditions for audiences of various sizes, but equally, we were also happy to carry out the performance only for ourselves in practice spaces (and also when no audience could be found). The elements of the traditions that seemed to make



65| *A Morris Dancer Should Never Appear to Touch the Ground*, 2007, billboard presentation at Harker's building, Waygood Gallery, in Newcastle upon Tyne.

no sense to us, either because we had no expert at hand to help explain them to us, or simply because they were totally new to us, were performed nevertheless as best we could. But what did make complete sense to us as amateur performers and as followers of tradition was where the rational and logical gave way to the instinctive and the physical actions of performing. We sung the seemingly non-sensical songs that introduced morris dances and performed the absurd actions of mummers' plays even though we didn't always quite rationally understand what they were or where they had originated from.

Attempting to understand the humour involved in these traditions has been a significant element of my process in making artworks. While folklore-as-artwork allows new kinds of engagement and understanding, it also shows the slipperiness of translating humour across boundaries of cultural spaces. The humour can still be present in multiple forms, costumes, videos, images, props, and museum artefacts, but this process of translation into artworks alters the humour's meaning and effect. As these elements of humour are removed from their original local and social settings and shifted to the more reflective spaces of visual art, a distance is introduced between the folklore and its new form. There is a contextual shift from the shared understanding and local knowledge involved in the communal setting of a traditional event. In the gallery, an audience brings different kinds of interpretations that are shaped by the more formal and detached environment.

While humour can be a powerful tool for the reconfiguration of ideas,[189] the transferral of context also poses risks. In this process of transferral, the humour itself becomes an object for examination and reflection by the audience. The result can be that it takes on a kind of uncanny or estranged quality, as it is experienced out of its original social or performative context. In turn, this can lead to confusion and misunderstanding from audiences that have lost any connection with the original social or cultural setting.

Lucy Wright: *One of my main frustrations is that folk is often portrayed as just this comical, quirky thing. Whenever you see folk customs in the media, it's almost always presented like, "Look at these people doing this weird thing. How strange. Haha." And it irks me because yeah, some folk looks kind of funny to our modern eyes, but casting it as exclusively comedic limits*

and de-fangs it as a radical practice of self-determination, created and perpetuated by working-class communities. It takes this thing that is actually a really powerful statement of resistance and solidarity and makes it into something that we don't need to take seriously. I also think that, broadly speaking, a lot of the things we most identify with folk – the products of the nineteenth and twentieth century folk revivals – are middle-class interpretations of culture appropriated from working people, and forced into a conservatorship – so it feels really galling to also poke fun at that. Like, "Look at me! Look how poor and uneducated I am!"

Matthew: *And I think that's one of the strengths of your work: that you've made it very clear what you're doing, where you see a gap or a problem, and the position that you want to take to address that. But when I think about what drives me artistically, it took me quite a while to come to this, but it's – and I still don't have the language to describe it – it's almost indescribable. Like a situation, for example, when you see the Burryman inside the Tesco's in South Queensbury, and [realise] how weird it is, and [that] many different things are operating at the same time. This is a tradition and aesthetically it's very striking. Who are the people that are doing this? And then, what does it communicate? Mark Fisher has his definition of the weird and the eerie. He had an interesting way of talking about what is weird. Weird is something unexpected in the home or in a domestic or familiar setting.*

Lucy: *Yeah.*

Matthew: *I think that's quite close to what gives me the motivation for doing all this stuff. Bringing that out and trying to interrogate it aesthetically. That's quite a different angle. All these other things are there, like the question of representation and placemaking and community and history as well, but really, it's the strangeness that motivates me.*

Lucy: *Yeah, but I don't know. We work really closely on every part of it, but I don't feel like yours is a "Haha, look at that*

strangeness". It's more an embrace of what that strangeness offers.

Matthew: *Yes, exactly.*

Lucy: *That's why it's important. Or what it disrupts of our everyday lives. That's what is more important to me than "Haha, look at this, it's weird".*

4.2.3 Who is making the joke?

If viewed in a certain light, humorous situations can arise anywhere, and almost anything can become comic when viewed from a particular angle. But when humour appears in a contemporary art setting, it unfolds through the specific circumstances of the artwork, where the humour is linked to, and how it is generated by the artist. In other words, the comic moment in art is never anonymous because it is bound up with this, the artistic point of view. In my own practice, this is most often connected to my interest in the aesthetics of disguise and fascination with what happens with the disruption that occurs when you are either wearing a costume or confronted with someone or something else who does so. There is a peculiar pleasure in constructing these pieces as artworks (that resemble artefacts), not just for the sake of transformation, but because the very process of hand-making costumes and other artefacts, awkward and imperfect in their handmade-ness, allows me to laugh, and this is something I attempt to share. The hand-made and attempting to become something else in an almost-but-not-quite-successful way, becomes a stage for the comic.

In my own childhood, costumes and masks and the possible transformations that they could offer were never really a big influence. When I reflect on this, it seems that I was always disappointed that the transformations were never truly possible through simply wearing the costume or the mask that I had attempted to make from paper or whatever else and so my attempts at making them were always a frustration. What I now realise is that the kind of transformation I was seeking but not finding, as a child, is no longer the point. What matters to me now artistically is the very human process of attempting to become something else, or watching others also try. The wonder lies in the humour and pleasure

of its imperfections, and in how artworks that celebrate this can be shared.

4.2.4 Close-reading the humour

In the process of attempting to show folklore-as-artwork, my goal is to essentially highlight the wonder, strangeness, joy, and humour that I find there, emphasising its uniqueness. Because I am trying to show the value in the process of presenting these objects, the humour involved is not ironic. They stand on their own as fictional or historical artefacts in an exhibition context. But, in this context of contemporary art, a subsequent question arises on the transferral of context. Do the humorous elements of folklore remain when it they are now framed as art? When folklore enters the gallery as an artwork, attention shifts as the locus of the (humorous) folkloric object has changed. Any comic framework has been translated from its original setting into a new kind of conceptual space designed for close observation and reflection, making the mechanics of a visual joke more exposed in comparison.

One strategy is to present the humour in a straightforward way, making use of framing and display architectures that are designed for the kinds of observation typical of museum and gallery spaces, and making use of Bergson's general rule of comic meaning; that is, trying to fit something that doesn't normally fit into a well-established form.[190] This approach allows for the humour to unfold through its own visual and aesthetic qualities, as well as through the "deadpan" character of its presentation. This can have the effect of both creating an artistic gap between a serious and a comic approach, or of allowing both of these appearances to happen at the same time. But, as humour has the chance to unfold in the works there is value in addressing how it is interpreted, reflecting on who, why, or where the jokes were formulated. The artworks that I construct have a chance to function in this zone, inviting questions on humour but also in aesthetic engagement. The threads of the humour that lie in the construction of a costume that has a seemingly absurd or carnivalesque purpose also help to construct imagination and speculation of a possible alternative use or alternative zone where such a costume has a real function. This extra layer of humorous context has the capacity to disorient and distract in different directions, producing a kind of comic awkwardness within an artistic setting.

Where artworks are made up of historic artefacts and fictional works, an underlying question from audiences is often: "How

is it that this could be art?" and then (awkwardly) "Is it meant to be funny?" Presenting such works places a focus on institutional framing, establishing that the work is actually art and also giving signals to how an audience might interpret playfulness, absurdity, and comedy in the works.

66| Production still from *The Maimann*, 2019, digital video, 8 min. 24 sec.

Viewers' reactions to humour in an art setting can seem to operate on a spectrum of familiarity. On one hand, laughter can arise from the recognition of the cultural codes in folklore, where an audience identifies with the tradition behind the work and there is a certain pleasure in the appreciation of recognising its humour. On the other hand, laughter can also be generated from an unfamiliarity, a form of bewilderment at something that is encountered as new and extra-ordinary. The framing of the presentation of the works dictates the success of this second kind of humour, as the intention of the artist and the institution needs to be clearly established. The risk with humour that arises from unfamiliarity is that an audience may lack the contextual materials needed to guide their appreciation of the works. The construction of locality and cultural specificity complicates this further. However sensitively an artist frames the work, the comedic effect may not fully translate, or people might laugh out of discomfort or confusion.

Acknowledging and respecting these contextual differences, while recognising the fragile boundaries where humour in folklore intersects with the expectations in a contemporary art setting, is an essential artistic skill. Negotiating how the humour might come across requires care and reflection on the part of both the exhibiting artist and the institution. The comic contained within folklore-as-artwork can reveal several layers of understanding within the works themselves. At the same time the complexities of an audience's position, cultural differences, and the unstable rules that define both art and humour come into play. Humour can fail and mislead, as well as being the point of the work itself, but on all these levels, the humour involved connects it to the social and culturally constructed frameworks that it stems from.

4.2.5 Exaggerations and embellishments of the unfinished body

Some costumes and props worn by folk performers belong to a way of dressing that exaggerates the figure of the performer or covers them in peculiar materials and symbolic objects. The *May Man*, the *Strawbear*, and the Burryman are examples of these in traditions of the Wildman. These exaggerations and embellishments create



a weird presence that activates a carnivalesque body comic. They draw attention to the performer in a comic sense, using materials from nature or other cheap but unusual supplies as decorations. They often force limits of movement on the wearer that restricts their freedom to move in ways that can actually animate the costume even more.

These type of costumes and props also belong to traditions of the grotesque body, or what literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin referred to as "unfinished".[191] This imperfectness that manifests as excess, awkwardness, and hidden forms of movement can be comic in itself, but at the same time, as artworks they imply that there is a purpose to these costumes that may or may not be clear from the contextual materials.

In my own practice, these kinds of forms are a sculptural practice, making the most of exaggeration and abundance of materials. I fall back on the methods of creating disguise that I gained experience in as a performer in folk traditions myself. The resulting works reflect the styles and techniques that these traditions utilise, producing fictionalised and imagined versions of costumes, or pieces that have previously been wholly or partly used in live art or folk performances that I have taken part in, such as the *Wildman/Wudewasa* (2010). How these pieces might perform is often running through my mind as I construct costumes in my studio, or as I try them on in front of a mirror, or when I attempt to move in them before hanging them on mannequins and positioning them in a gallery presentation. Usually, my practical questions are about how to attach various things, considering how best to make use of materials (such as cameras, stones, microphones, clay pipes, drumsticks, matchsticks, or anything else) that can end up being heavy and unwieldy for the wearer.

In this awkward sense, humour is an essential element of how sculptural, costume, and object-based folklore-as-artworks function, placing a focus on the use of materials, form, and other aesthetic modes. They operate differently to a live performance artwork or the performance of a folk ritual where the artist or performer can provide an innate association of their bodily presence in the work, something that can only be implied when the works are presented as purely sculptural or object-based works. The Wildman costumes from the exhibition *The Scream of the Strawbear* are examples of this. The sense of humour in these works comes from the impossibility of actually or practically making use of these costumes as regular wearable items of clothing, and in realising this, there is an

67| Exhibition view of *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Gießen in 2019, showing *Sound Operator* (Wildman), 2019, microphones, cables, textile, chains, mannequin, wooden stand.





understanding that their function therefore must be as performative artworks, as they would be difficult to make use of for anything else.

Humour as a serious element of artistic practice is a device for dealing with complex issues. Instead of conveying definitive meanings, humour invites speculation, encouraging an active engagement from its audience involving play, questioning, and imagination. Philosopher Simon Critchley points out that, in this process, humour has the unique ability to momentarily distance us from our common sense, reconnecting us with a shared understanding of the world through a subtle process of defamiliarisation.[192] In a process that enhances the estrangement already present in a gallery, the comic contained within folklore-as-artwork can produce small disruptions, which Critchley describes as "moments of dissensus communis", that remind us of our communal sensibility by briefly pulling us out of it.[193]

68| *Wildman/ Wudewasa*, 2010, wigs, textiles, shoes.

4.3 The funny peculiar and the funny particular

4.3.1 Artistic humour as a side effect

The value of humour in art is culturally specific, and this has been clear as I have moved through cultural contexts from New Zealand to the British art scene to participate more in the German, Finnish, and other European contexts. A German curator in London once told me that generally British artists value humour above all else, whilst Germans find this unserious and instead most value philosophical rigour. These generalisations mean almost nothing, but they do show that the role of humour in art is a significant element of how it is encountered and knowing how it functions and performs as an element of artistic practice is key when working with folklore. In my experience the following traces of humour in folklore-as-artwork have become important to recognise:

1| The comic figurative humour of the body in costumes and props.
2| Folklore-as-artworks that operate as a double comic device across social and artistic settings.
3| The strange and peculiar in the humour of folklore.
4| The aesthetics of subverting high for low cultural contexts.

Matthew: *A couple of people have said to me about my own exhibitions, "Oh, this is really surreal", or they make connections between surrealism and the aesthetics of folklore. I've*

started to think about it. It's quite interesting that, firstly, it's one level on which the art world or art historians can access some of the aesthetics of folklore. But on the other hand, I think it's something that's almost innate to the way that folk rituals operate. They're operating on the level of almost sub-conscious references – fertility or the darkest time of year or bringing good luck. And then all of these strange mixtures of symbolism, costume, disguise, and things like that. So, I've been thinking about that quite a lot recently, but I just wondered if you had thought that before?

Faye Claridge: *I haven't really thought about it, but you are right. A lot of people use the word uncanny with my work, particularly with the portraits. They talk about them being uncanny. But I had a slight issue with that and was kind of thinking, "Well, are they uncanny – because they're real people doing things that aren't that hard to understand?" And yet maybe it does link back to what we talked about in terms of performances and choosing to be a character. Maybe that does link to… I'm thinking more of Monty Python really than surrealism as art history, in that it's that very conscious choice, again linking back to punk, to do the unexpected or do the ridiculous. And for that to almost be political, to be a very conscious choice, but as I said before, very much in the parameters. You can be your weekend part-time anarchist and not have it interrupt your Monday to Friday. And I think maybe there is surrealism in one definition.*

But yeah, it's an interesting thought, isn't it? My first thought when you were saying it is: is it a way of taking it less seriously, almost? But maybe I'm just a bit too aware of that. Whether putting it in that box is slightly like, "Oh, I don't have to think what it means, because if it's surreal, then it's just a kind of, as you say, an unconscious or a dream-like thing that doesn't necessarily have to have any real politics". When it is actually often very political, isn't it?

Erwin Wurm has discussed the use of humour in his own works as a *side effect* of a method of examining the absurd and the

paradoxical in the world. He sees his works as devices for gaining a different perspective on the world.[194] This quality of the humorous side effect of an artwork means that there remain other levels on which to engage with the work, apart from the humorous. Objects of folklore-as-artwork then serve a double function because they are artworks that invite attention on other socio-political and historical themes when placed in art settings, but they might also be performative objects dealing in humour in their original folk context. As a folklore prop or a performance object (whether real or fictional) there is already a function as a performative object, but when they are employed as readymade artworks they are reassigned for another use. This reassignment examines the folk-object-as-artwork by bringing it into a relationship with new sets of criteria, such as aesthetic, political, and relational considerations.

Humour can, however, be a risky and paradoxical subversive tool because it includes both inclusive and exclusive components.[195] There is a risk that the comic disruption of an artwork can work against interpretation or even engagement in a deeper connection to the overall work. If the original reference was humorous in a particular folk tradition, the extent to which the humour is translated into this new context depends on who is viewing it and how it comes to be interpreted.

4.3.2 Dislocating the particular

Firstly, a contemporary art audience's level of familiarity with the particular traditions involved dictates how it is interpreted. Accompanying explanations or contextual labelling might be required to interpret the work as this can offer an explanation of how the object could have a purpose other than in an art context, whilst also providing a rich opportunity to frame a comic understanding. The idea that there is another system of values associated with the object contributes to its contextual dislocation in its artistic context. This dislocation can disrupt the original humour of the folklore-as-artwork and the cultural connections that the humour depended on. This leads to a further consideration: who is the audience for the humour? If the folkore-as-artwork functions as a readymade art object, then the comic intention was not for the art audience at all (in which case you had to be there at its original setting) so the artwork then functions as a kind of document of folk humour, allowing for its observation and understanding only in relation to its original context. On the other hand, the isolation of an object as

an artwork in a gallery setting, away from a performative or ritual context, might also increase a focus on its humorous intentions, providing a chance to look again at its ritual, aesthetic, and comic functionality.

Folk rituals where participants create a sense of the extra-ordinary – such as the mummers' plays, morris dances, and Wildman processions discussed in this text – are often able to use humour to mock structures of authority and established social norms. These kinds of folk traditions that satirise authority, be it social, religious, or political, often unfold in live, communal settings. The live performative spirit also animates many kinds of traditional carnival parades that openly mock politicians and public figures, employing humour and social codes familiar to their audiences as a way of bringing the powerful down to size. Participants of Wildman traditions dress in natural materials, command attention in processions, and engage in transgressive behaviours such as excessive noise, disruption of public space, and consumption of alcohol. These unusual but sanctioned transgressions, even when their original meaning is unclear, often result in spectacles that involve absurd scenes. Spectacle and absurdity are familiar elements in both the art world and folk traditions, both involving particular forms of rebellion against social convention and gestures toward alternative ways of understanding order and authority. When elements of folk traditions are translated into artistic expressions, the implication of humour toggles between document and transformation of the original context. It draws attention to their materiality, the settings in which they occur, the intentions of the performers towards their public, and the significance of their actions.

4.4 Play and laughter in the gallery space

4.4.1 Installation as an invitation to play

From my point of view, it is important to be able to reflect on an approach of experimental play as a productive mode for creating both individual artworks and overall presentations. For me, "playing at" museum installations or "playing at" folklore is not taken lightly; rather, it is a deliberate strategy to access artistic agency in the field. Experimentation through play involves testing from multiple angles, trying to see what happens, and allowing space for silliness and jokes. This is not to say, however, that it does not represent a serious mode of artistic production; it can be fun, but equally it

is important to recognise the necessary freedom of imagination required to play at each stage of the studio process.

As modes of artistic creation, experimentation and play are central to the production of humour as they allow artists and their audiences to explore, test conventions, and embrace chaos and chance. Play is essential for artistic experimentation but can also serve as an invitation for audiences to participate in the process of engagement with the works. To an audience, play means suspending disbelief and embracing the fictional and the comic constructs of the artist, and taking up an invitation to engage in speculative artistic possibility.

This mode of imaginative freedom was first conceptualised by cultural historian Johan Huizinga as the "play frame", a temporary suspension of society's usual rules and logic that can create space for sanctioned irrationality and surprise.[196] This suspension is not about chaos for its own sake, but about valuing disruptions of established conventions, an approach often at the heart of satirical humour. Within the play frame, the constraints that usually make absurdity confusing, are set aside. The play frame has many applications across cultural disciplines, but artistically it is useful for thinking about how audiences engage with works. In experiencing artworks, rational understanding can be freely and temporarily replaced by more chaotic or unpredictable readings, in turn producing alternative, comic, or peculiar interpretations. It is a mode that frees participants to invite the unpredictability, subversion, and the comic possibilities inherent in creative disruption. When an experimental or playful approach has produced artworks, this mode of audience interpretation can in turn nurture an environment such as in the museum or the gallery space, where humour and speculation are an accepted and necessary element of fully engaging with the works.

4.4.2 Overriding the urge to laugh

However, the multitude of ways that audiences interact with works are never entirely predictable, despite the artistic conditions that are artistically and institutionally created in which to experience them. Although humour is an element that interests me as an artist, I still find it quite rare to hear a laugh-out-loud response from audiences in a contemporary art setting. The social conventions at play in an art gallery are quite different to those of a stand-up comedy stage or even a circus, where collective audience laughter is the reason

people attend. Most people's experience as an audience at an art gallery is as an individual or as a part of small group and so the social norms of sharing our appreciation of something through laughter or some kind of agreeable chortling are not so necessary. In fact, the experience of artistic humour is more often that we might be questioning what the humorous elements might signify, or what purpose the comic elements are serving, and this questioning instinct overrides the urge we might have to laugh.

In the 2004 performance video *Journey to the Lower World*, Marcus Coates performs a shamanic ritual in the front room of an apartment from a Liverpool tower block that has been scheduled for demolition. By vacuuming, spitting water, and emitting feral whistles, grunts, and barks he searches for answers about what will happen to the local context. In the video, we witness an audience of local residents laughing nervously at the unfolding performance.[197] This audience is clearly part of the work and serves as a proxy audience for the viewer who watches the finished performance video. Although he plays it straight, continuing to perform as a shaman-like figure, it remains unclear how seriously Coates intended the ritual performance to be taken, and it is documented in such a way that it is possible to observe both the audience of locals laughing at the performance and the whole spectacle of the ritual itself. There is an ambiguity about whom the humour is for, because the performance that Coates undertakes is carried out seriously, but it is not at all clear that anyone in the performance's audience actually takes him seriously.

The placement of the work in an art context, though, signals that its purpose is not just the humour generated by Coates's shamanic ritual, or identifying with the laughter of the audience that was present, but that it is an element of something else, art. Because the whole performance is an artwork, when we, as an audience, also find the performance humorous or even uncomfortable, we are involved in the generation of the meaning of the work. Critchley notes that the best humour is not actually funny, but disorienting, it implicates the audience in its comic structure.[198] We might hesitate to laugh at artworks we encounter in the realm of contemporary art as we are aware that the humour we experience is almost certainly serving this other purpose. This suspicion can direct the audience's attention elsewhere, as well as directing a focus on the form of the work itself.

4.4.3 Peculiar or haha

When humour is described as "funny peculiar" rather than "funny haha" it indicates a kind of humour that does not always lead to immediate or obvious laughter, instead operating in a different mode. The comic can be cheap, as a first response, but this in turn only raises the question whether there is more going on in an artwork than a simple joke. When folklore is presented as art, its humour and comic potential is amplified or reinterpreted, providing a focus on its particular uniqueness. These specialised properties can highlight folklore as strange or peculiar. Looking past the humour then, means that it has to be taken seriously as an element of the work, and this can remove the instinctive, emotional response that humour provides.[199]

An incarnation of this can be seen in the resting clowns of Ugo Rondinone. I first saw these life-like sculpted and costumed clowns at his show *Everything gets lighter* at the Taidehalli in Helsinki in 2019.[200] Numerous 3D-printed, life-like, sculpted and costumed clowns were presented in the gallery spaces, preserved in resting poses. They are a figurative example of how humour is transformed into something else in an art setting. Clowns, whose currency is comedy, were sculpted as if at rest in the gallery, taking time off from the comic, but in observing them in this state we are allowed to see other things, even pathos in them as human figures at rest. As artworks, the immediate, intuitive humorous reaction to a comic figure is stripped away, directing us to engage with the subject matter with a different kind of contemplative response. Rondinone's clowns are not telling jokes and so become a symbolic paradox where a comic symbol is used to evoke pathos. This shift in reading from instinctive emotional response to a more reflective interpretation is one way that the emblems of humour turn from the comic to the peculiar in an art setting.

In taking folklore-as-artwork seriously, when we move past the comic, the humour can become peculiarity. This peculiar humour is closely tied to the ideas of social and local particularity and to cultural specificity. It is connected to the traditional values and cultural context of a specific place. Folklore, which is made up of the traditional stories and expressive practices of a community, often celebrates the differences that define that culture's identity. Humour is a form of cultural insider knowledge, as Critchley points out, as it is strongly connected to the local and to the many layers of where we are from.[201] In this sense, specific humour associated with

folk traditions is an identifier of particular kinds of knowing. Laughter is not necessarily the purpose; rather, the humour serves as an implicit acknowledgement of where it has come from, highlighting the unique features and experiences that belong to a particular group and recognition to those in the know.

Lucy Wright: *I suppose it's that tension between what a spectator who's outside of it perceives and what the person performing it perceives.*

Matthew: *But even the people performing it often don't have a full idea of what it is…*

Lucy: *True, true.I remember when I was doing my PhD and I went and interviewed a bunch of morris dancers, I was interested in their take on tradition. The vast majority said, "It's not about the sanctity of tradition. I just like dancing, hanging out with friends…"*

Matthew: *"We go to the pub…"*

Lucy: *"We go to the pub afterwards." I wanted to meet new people," et cetera. They didn't speak about it in the ways I expected. That was something I learned.*

4.5 The low and the high and the Strawbear's scream

4.5.1 Smashing the egg crown

When the *May Man* in Rittershausen smashes the eggs that are suspended in his headpiece, the action appears quite strange and unusual to observe for the first time. He uses a particular stick with a knobbled end (**Img. 69**), which he swings up over his head, breaking some of the eggshells that are suspended in multiple strings above his body, shattering them into pieces that fall to the ground. In person, there is an element of a celebratory atmosphere as many people are following the procession, which is punctuated by the places at which the *May Man* smashes his suspended egg crown. It is a

69| May man procession in Rittershausen in 2019.





70| The May man's stick hanging in the barn while he prepares for the procession in Rittershausen in 2019.

71| Broken eggshells leftover from the May man procession in Rittershausen in 2019.



kind of action that draws attention to itself as a spectacle and marks the performance of the ritual with white shattered eggshells leaving traces through the streets. It is humorous in a way that appears to be more strange than comic, as it is not quite clear how to understand the action, other than to realise that it is what the Maiman does in Rittershausen each year.

The *May Man*'s self-smashing is documented in my video piece *The Maimann*, 2019. When this video is presented in the gallery, it is possible to re-look, as the action repeats on a loop. While the broken white eggshells and the action of smashing them belongs uniquely to the Rittershausen *May Man*, watching moving images that focus in on the act frame it as even more particular. As pieces of eggshells fragment on the street, the ritual leaves behind traces as links to community and continuity.

In folklore, an act like the smashing of an eggshell crown sometimes takes on an absurdist quality, operating through seemingly illogical structures that can confuse or surprise an audience (and sometimes even participants).[202] This doesn't, however, mean that the rituals themselves are absurd, but that their humour comes from seemingly strange and out of place elements. Albert Camus explains the logic of the absurd as a clash between our search for logic and an overall silent reality that lacks inherent meaning.[203] In a folk context, it can arise from a gap between our desire to find a rational explanation and the apparent insignificance of certain traditions to our contemporary context. We know that folk rituals can lose their original practical purposes but still survive as social or performative traditions,[204] and this is one reason why, in a contemporary context, traditions can appear comically incongruous. While traditions may seem out of place or time, their deeper value lies in how they help communities express collective hopes, fears, and adapt to changing social realities. Artistically, these ritual structures are endlessly interesting because they provide freedom and alternatives in response to social norms and they deal in a kind of instinctive, chaotic, alternative order. Sometimes, observing traces of folk humour (and trails of broken eggshells on the street) and drawing attention to their underlying structures, can be an artistic tool in itself.

4.5.2 High and low subversions

The materiality of the smashed eggshells has the chance to take on multiple meanings when they are brought into an art context



72| *Untitled, 320 broken eggshells*, 2019, eggshells, acrylic case.

where presenting folklore-as-artwork exemplifies a process of shifting "low culture" objects into a new field where they are reconceptualised as "high". Different meanings and significance are assigned to them, sometimes creating dissonance between the original and new contexts. This consumption of supposed lower ranks of culture in fine art has been a dominant force in many art movements of the twentieth century, and each era has its own complicated version of this process. From Dada to pop and post-internet art, the material of low culture and its references provide a continuous stream of material for contemporary art as part of a process that complicates and elevates its status.

Art attempts to maintain a critical distance from objects of culture that are associated with the everyday and the commercial, but as Wes Hill points out, in doing so it actually brings both high and low together.[205] What follows is, as philosopher Terry Eagleton explains, the particular kind of satisfaction gained in seeing a high status brought down to the level of the low.[206] This might explain, particularly since postmodern times, the fascination of the materials of low and popular culture has provided for artists to bend towards new forms and modes, often functioning by transforming items from the spectrum of the mass-produced to become unique artworks. This is reflected too in wider cultural postmodern obsessions of fashion, where streetwear and sports clothing become transformed into high fashion and designer luxury items. Art has had its own long-standing hierarchy of what is high and low, known innately as insider knowledge. This dynamic recalls the early European folkloric tradition

discussed earlier: folklorists documented folk songs, paintings, and sculptures primarily as low versions of established high art forms.[207]

Matthew: *Your aesthetic, mixing these Old Masters styles with folk dancing, is something that I can recognise as an artist as a mixture of high and low culture. [These are] quite interesting layers to play with as an artist, and I think [this is] one way of accessing folklore as high art, and it's one level that the art world can understand.*

Faye Claridge: *Yeah, exactly. And I think probably in the simplest way, that's what I was trying to do. Why is this not part of our canon and our language? When we consider art history and cultural history, this should be in here – this is part of that, absolutely.*

The characteristics that define an understanding of low culture involve cultural materials that are of the commonplace and of the everyday, the unprofessional, handmade, or vernacular. In these terms, folklore can be included in this association of the materiality of low culture, its visual aesthetics are often crafted and domestic in nature, though it favours the handmade over the mass-produced. The materials of folklore, which often make use of what is at hand, bring a new kind of focus to the craft of making apparent in folk craft and the aesthetics of costumes. Re-using, making use of natural materials that are in abundance at certain time of year, and the value of making by hand now take on new meanings in an age of ecological and political concern around materiality. The value of what is "at hand" that has always been present in the creation of traditional folk objects can now be ascribed new ecological or political features. As a subject within contemporary art, folklore becomes something high or something to be looked at in a significantly different kind of way than "normal".

4.5.3 A challenge to the usual state of things

One of the key characteristics of folk rituals that interests me are the qualities of incongruity in how it unfolds; that is, the presence

of something unexpected or out of place in an everyday setting. A kind of relative of the weird or the eerie, this incongruity is central to a kind of humour that often arises in folklore. It can create a sense of surprise, confusion, or disruption because it challenges the usual state of things, even if we were to know and expect it to happen. This disruption is key to the interpretation of the function of the ritual and can be comic as it generates humour by forcing us to consider our expectations as we wait to see if there might be a visual or spoken punchline or resolution. This incongruity can come initially from the kinds of costumes that folk performers are wearing, which often are based on historical or traditional dress, such as those seen in morris dancing costumes or worn by mummers' play characters. Wildman traditions such as the *May Man* and the *Strawbear* have another kind of incongruity as their costumes are particular and unique to that year's celebration, and their particular performative ritual actions provide another level of the unexpected. They are peculiar and unique performers, marked as separate entities from the community by their materiality as a connection to the parallel world of nature.

Experiencing something that doesn't fit neatly into a logical framework can provoke curiosity, or even a sense of wonder, even when we knew it was going to happen, and even if we created it ourselves. This kind of humour can come from the tension between what we expect to occur and what actually happens. As a result, the tension creates dissonance and surprise, as a moment where we are temporarily unsettled, but also engaged, even though we might know what was about to unfold. Folklore-as-artworks amplify this incongruity by suggesting that we take a closer look at the power of this sense of comic folk strangeness when faced with serious questions. On top of this, presenting folklore in a contemporary art setting actually adds another layer of incongruity, as it introduces a different set of values distinct from the folklore's original context. This creates a sense of uncertainty that is important because it operates in this artistic space for reflection, questioning, imagination, and wonder.

4.5.4 The Sound of the Cultural Office as rough music

This uncertainty is one aspect of the interplay of repeated dissonance, tension, and resolution that forms part of the artistic questioning in my ongoing video series *The Sound of the Cultural Office*.[208] So far, it is comprised of three parts – Giessen, Hannover,

and Seinäjoki – each video involves staff from cultural institutions in their respective cities and serves as a meta-commentary on the project to which they belong; essentially, an exhibition postscript involving the city's cultural authority. Cultural workers appear on screen, standing silently for up to a minute before screaming, as if to scare something away. The screams punctuate long silent periods that might be experienced as growing periods of awkward tension.

This screaming gesture references the *Strawbear*'s scream and other traditions of noisy folk protest, sometimes called "rough music", that had their origins in calling out community transgression. Historically, these kinds of noisy folk protest traditions, such as the *Strawbear* customs in Hessen, had class associations, with the resulting chaos and revelry providing opportunities for rituals to take place in private spaces not typically open to workers. In these video scenes, cultural workers with their non-lingual screams are transformed from administrators, curators, and managers into performers, unsettling the usual curatorial hierarchy and inviting viewers to consider the rest of the exhibition alongside the performing but uncostumed screaming cultural workers. They can be interpreted as abstract, performative texts addressing the themes of the exhibitions themselves. Some of these performances by cultural workers are joyful, while others are more melancholic or even alarming. The intention was to address the institutional architecture of cultural organisations by setting aside conventional language and leaving the performance of screams open to interpretation.

In employing these non-lingual screams, there is a combined challenge to the exhibition display and interpretation, allowing a more visceral engagement with the institution's own operational and thematic undercurrents. An emotional landscape of cultural work has the chance to be seen as a resonant and openly interpretable artistic statement.

187 This is similar to how the handkerchief masks in this research function: they are evidence of a conversation that has taken place; a tangible archive of a post-performance dialogue.

188 Faye Claridge writes on her website, 'I was born in England in Punk's Year Zero.' See Faye Claridge, 'About', *Faye Claridge*, accessed 7 August 2024, https://fayeclaridge.co.uk/about.

189 Claire Robbins, *Curious Lessons in the Museum: The Pedagogic Potential of Artists' Interventions* (Ashgate, 2013), 106.

190 Bergson, *Laughter*, 112.

191 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984), 26.

192 Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (Routledge, 2002), 18.

193 Critchley, *On Humour*, 18.

194 Nicholas Wroe, "'Humour Is a Side-Effect of My Methods': The Absurd Sculptures of Erwin Wurm", *The Guardian*, 29 June 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jun/29/erwin-wurm-yorkshire-sculpture-park.

195 Robbins, *Curious Lessons*, 101.

196 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 8.

197 Frieze, "Marcus Coates", *Frieze*, 6 June 2007, https://www.frieze.com/article/marcus-coates.

198 Mami Kataoka and Simon Critchley, *Laughing in a Foreign Language* (Hayward Publishing, 2008), 22.

199 Wendy Wick Reaves, "The Art in Humor, the Humor in Art", *American Art* 15, no. 2 (2001): 5.

200 See "Ugo Rondinone", *Taidehalli*, n.d., accessed 31 July 2025, https://taidehalli.fi/en/events/ugo-rondinone/.

201 Critchley, *On Humour*, 18.

202 The classic set up in English mummers' plays, as the doctor administers nonsense cures, such as a (literal) tap on the head, to the fallen hero, before proclaiming that he is cured, is an example.

203 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (Penguin Classics, 1979), 32.

204 Ranger and Hobsbawm, *Invention of Tradition*, 4.

205 Hill, *Folklore Shaped Modern Art*, 3.

206 Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (Yale University Press, 2019), 15.

207 Pocius, "Art", 89. See also section 3.6.2 above; Deller and Alan Kane, *Folk Archive*.

208 The video works from the series *The Sound of the Cultural Office* that are included in this research are from Giessen and Seinäjoki.

73| Production still from *The Sound of the Cultural Office, Giessen*, 2019, digital video, 9 min. 47 sec.



V.

"IN COMES I..." AND THE CARNI-VALESQUE AFTER-EFFECT



5.1 The upside-down and the land of Cockaigne

5.1.1 Crossing the threshold

In mummers' plays, the stock entrance line of each character as they enter the play is: "In Comes I…". It is a way of literally announcing their arrival while simultaneously introducing themselves. For instance, after some action, characters call for a doctor to attend to the fallen hero and subsequently, the doctor indeed appears – through a door, or by stepping forward into the play – and as they do so, they say, "In comes I, a doctor".

As ritual plays that belong to a kind of folk tradition that historically called at houses or pubs, mummers' plays operate with customary objectives involving luck and threshold crossing through many social spaces.[209] Traditionally, groups of mummers in Britain perform a play at Christmas or other set times of the year, with each group of mummers performing a play that has local origins. Similarly, other folk traditions such as the *Nuuttipukki* in Finland, and even popularly understood contemporary Halloween celebrations, involve calling at houses and the bringing communities luck that is either good or bad, doing so through carrying out a disguised ritual.

Although there are many traditions of mummers around the world that do not perform a play, English mummers' plays are short, traditional folk "theatregrams" that follow a mostly uniform formula, including a comic battle and revival of a dead character by comic means. They are mobile traditions, in that their performance takes place on a "common stage". In reality this means a pub, private front room, public square, or even the street. This common stage is often created by one of the first characters of the play coming into a space and "sweeping" a broom around in a circle on the ground to create a rough imagined stage where the action can take

74| *Heel and Toe, Jig Pants*, 2019, new German clay tobacco pipes, broken clay tobacco pipes, trousers, shoes, mannequin, wooden stand.

75| *I'll Sweep Your House*, 2008, brooms, brushes, handles.



place. The ritual will in fact often be performed wherever an audience might be found, its performers wandering from place to place and pub to pub.

In line with their uniform formula, a pivotal character in the ritual is the figure of the doctor, who is a focus for the resolution of the action, being the one responsible for bringing the "dead" character back to life again, using some element of comic revival. Before administering a "cure", the doctor tries to boast of their skill, firstly by listing the places that they have travelled. In the Christmas mummers' play from Loughborough, the quack doctor starts their claim as follows:

> I went down a long lane, a short lane, a narrow lane, a wide lane, and I came to a house built with apple dumplings and thatched with pancakes. I knocked at the maid and the door came out. I called for a glass of bread and cheese and a crust of water. I med a bark and he dogged at me. I went to a stick and cut a hedge, fetched him a rattler on the napper and the spin did blood out.[210]

The doctor's nonsensical speech is in keeping with the general comic nonsense of the plays, but it also seems to hint at another kind of reality altogether, that of the utopian inverted myth-world of Cockaigne. Peter Millington's linguistic analysis of the text of such folk plays concluded that a few singular texts originating in the seventeenth century provided the genesis for nearly all of the regional variants of the mummers' plays in Britain that have survived through to today.[211] The convergence of linguistic analysis around the character of the quack doctor across many different versions of mummers' plays, clearly references poetic descriptions of the lands of Cockaigne. This opens up a real link between the performance of the mummers' play as a folk ritual and its functional purpose as a carrier of subversion and a logic of inverted fantasy.

5.1.2 The Cockaigne myth and impossible inversions

This subversive logic of inversion is not unique to mummer's plays, but belongs to a wider, European tradition of utopian fantasy. In his cultural history *Dreaming of the Land of Cockaigne*, Dutch medieval historian Herman Pleij examines Cockaigne as a pan-European utopia, a survey of an imagined life, examining medieval poetic texts that describe a fantasy of yearning for everything that appeared to be lacking.[212] As a mythical paradise, it is known by other



76| Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Het Luilekkerland (The Land of Cockaigne)*, 1567, oil on wood panel, 51.5 cm × 78.3 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.

names across European cultures: Lubberland (Britain), Liukkerland (Holland), Schlaraffenland (Germany), and Indiya Coromandia (Slovenia). All of these, and even the American Hobo paradise of the folk song *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, all portray elements of the Cockaigne myth with its underlying radical social inversions, freedom from basic human need, and characteristic utopian fantasy.

Cockaigne is a medieval destination of luxury and pleasure, a descendant of the topsy-turvy Roman celebrations of Saturnalia, European medieval festivals of Misrule, and in turn a rich visual ancestor of the social inversion in folk ritual that is at the heart of the carnivalesque nature of folk celebration as we know it today. Cockaigne is understood as a land of the inverse, where all the restrictions of society are reversed; beggars and debtors are pronounced kings and princes, sexual liberty is open and encouraged, and food is plentiful, with animals even pleading to be eaten. In the Middle Ages, it served both as an illogical ideal and an extreme opposite to the restrictions of the reality of medieval life. Some of this strange imagery can be seen in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's sixteenth-century painting *The Land of Cockaigne*,[213] where three extremely plump men are lying under a tree, at the centre of a world constructed from decadent and wondrous food. An egg walks towards a man with a spoon already inserted in it, whilst a pig wanders in from the distance with carving utensils readily protruding from its flank. In the distance a figure falls from a thick wall

of porridge he has supposedly had to eat through. The existence of a series of impossible scenarios, such as those referenced by the doctor of the mummers' play, hint at the fantasy and hope that lie at the heart of the Cockaigne myth.

5.1.3 The world upside-down

The excess of impossibility and inverted social hierarchies of Cockaigne mirror a literary mode that has come to be known as the world upside down. The radical uprisings surrounding the English Civil war in the seventeenth century had given rise to a phenomenon where it was possible to imagine the reality of a utopia such as the myth of Cockaigne actually coming to fruition. Christopher Hill's history of this period of revolutionary politics introduces this emergence of "the idea that the world might be permanently turned upside down: that the dream world of the Land of Cokayne or the kingdom of heaven might be attainable on earth now".[214] This in turn shows how the idea of inverting the strata of rigid hierarchies of the time became an enduring, revolutionary urge in people's imagination. Perhaps it is not surprising then that the revolutionary potential and fantastic imagery and symbolism of the Cockaigne myth, its potential for upending the solid structural and political configurations of society, survive in elements of vernacular culture and folk traditions such as mummers' plays, folk songs and dances.

A clear memory from one of the classrooms of my primary school in Auckland, was a map of the world with New Zealand at the top and Europe at the bottom, defying the convention of world maps that show the Northern hemisphere at the top and the Southern hemisphere below.[215] This was on my mind as I traced quotes from mummers' plays onto versions of upside-down world maps during my residency at Cecil Sharp House in 2009 (**Img. 77**). This simple visual inversion and all of its symbolic value has remained in my consciousness as a motif that has the potential to unravel convention and question colonial and geographical authority. And, as I began to follow and participate in folk traditions in Britain, it stayed in my mind as I began to make more sense of traditions that had been out of season when I had experienced them in New Zealand. This idea then, of the inverted social logic of many folk traditions and the social purpose of such rituals, is something that has always had a particular kind of symbolic visual attraction, as it is connected to the idea that things experienced upside-down can be transgressive and yet personally familiar at the same time.[216]

77| *I've Been to Hellamatitty*, 2009, marker pen on world map.



So, when each character in the mummer's play begins their lines with "In comes I…, they are both announcing their arrival and crossing the threshold onto the stage, even if it is sometimes only a metaphorical one. There is a parallel crossing of a threshold that occurs when we bring these kinds of folklore practices into a different kind of house, that of the art gallery. This threshold involves a kind of entering of the artistic sphere, from the traditional sphere, invoking the spirit of a trickster as boundary crosser, or as Lewis Hyde puts it in his analysis of the trickster figure, one who brings "mythic embodiments of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox".[217] Here, the kinds of artistic engagement with the inverted, where the ordinary hierarchies of sense, value, and authority are turned upside down, and with the symbolic agency produced by examining the world in its upturned, disordered state, is at its heart an acknowledgement of the mode of the carnivalesque, which is the main focus of this chapter.

5.2 The carnivalesque mode

5.2.1 Surveying the carnivalesque logic

The carnivalesque mode makes use of various disruptions, such as inversions and exaggerations, as playful gestures that can also challenge stable meanings and expose the mechanisms of authority and power. Art that experiments with this altered point of view participates in the carnival's mode of reimagining and destabilising accepted structures. In turn, this produces an estrangement that can suggest other possibilities of how the world can be understood.

Perhaps the most influential analysis of the carnivalesque was that offered by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. There, Bakhtin explains that the carnivalesque is a literary mode in which a revolutionary subversive state of being exists, laying down a challenge to a dominant culture though symbolic inversions, humour, and chaos. Bakhtin asserts that this state of being is inherited from the idea of the carnival and its historical and mythological predecessors in medieval and Roman mythologies.[218] Bakhtin's view of the carnival as a pseudo revolutionary state offers an insight into the satirical functions of carnivalesque folklore. It refers not to the formal traditions of actual carnival events but to its structural and affective qualities of inversion, the grotesque, laughter, parody, excess, and a destabilisation of official hierarchies. These elements of the carnivalesque mode are what can become productive artistically

in tracing these recurring features, as they appear across folk traditions, and filtering them into contemporary art practice. To work with the carnivalesque is therefore not to imitate carnival itself, but to survey its logic and aesthetic residues.

A key to beginning to engage with the carnivalesque as a mode is Bakhtin's understanding that laughter is a unique way of knowing.[219] While reason, solemn logic, and the officially accepted and structured rules of the everyday belong to our familiar register, laughter interrupts these conditions and reveals other scenarios. What becomes possible and visible through laughter are experiences that can be shared, such as acts of comic resistance, the shared communal experience in the joy of absurdity, the carnival humour of the grotesque body, and the renewal of social bonds through satire and parody.

Personally, however, these modes were unfamiliar in the festivals and celebrations I experienced as I grew up in New Zealand, or even when I later moved to England. There, as Timothy Hyman mentions in the catalogue for *Carnivalesque*, an exhibition that toured Britain in 2000, the visual traditions of carnival would be unfamiliar to contemporary viewers.[220] However, what the carnivalesque signifies is not actual festivity itself, but an idea. The tools of the artistic carnivalesque therefore lay out artistically a kind of comic toolbox of critical devices.

Bakhtin's fundamentals of the carnivalesque outline these underlying carnivalesque challenges to order, which all are marked by a sense of humour and mocking:

- Carnival is a site where everyone is free to interact and express themselves. This often produces unusual combinations of the social order such as the exchange of social hierarchies.
- Unconventional (or even transgressive) behaviour is championed without consequence or sanction.
- Misalliances: The form of carnival permits the alliance of things that are normally opposite or opposed, such as heaven and hell, young and old, male and female.
- Carnivalesque Inversions. Things that are normally appreciated and respected are inverted and stripped of their power. Carnivalesque celebrations are often obscene, profane and debased. They refer to base and earthly notions of the world's structure.

5.2.2 Carnival vs research

If the carnival itself operates in this instinctive, bodily, and satirical mode, then traditional modes of research can be formulated as its opposite: reflective, methodical, and discursive. Yet when approached through the lens of the carnivalesque, artistic research still has a possibility to be reimagined as an analysis and method, and also as a speculative encounter with other ways of knowing. The carnivalesque does not offer systematic knowledge because it deals in the chaos of the opposite, inversion, and many other excesses where the result is a not a conclusive argument, but a multiplicity of perspectives. An artistic engagement with the carnivalesque then does not simply document folk traditions or apply theoretical frameworks, it enters a speculative mode that examines how knowledge might emerge from the parody, failure, laughter, and inversion of the carnivalesque. This kind of speculation is not irrational, only differently rational, because it points towards contradictions in the temporary and the unfinished as legitimate forms of enquiry, where multiple voices might be heard in simultaneous polyphony. Reflective enquiry seeks coherent forms of argument, while engagement with the carnivalesque relies on visual fragmentation on multiple levels dealing in laughter and an embodied experience. Bringing these modes together allows artistic research to embrace the paradoxical because it becomes a practice that is at once reflective *and* instinctive, an oscillation between method and instinctive performative action. To treat the carnivalesque as a speculative mode then, is to recognise its capacity to generate proposals about and for the world through the suspension of order, lateral thinking, and creating spaces where knowledge is glimpsed in practices of parody. Artistic research that engages with the carnivalesque therefore opens itself to forms of knowledge that cannot be captured by conventional methods but can still be documented, performed, and archived artistically.

Eagleton moves the discussion of the carnivalesque mode one step further, proposing that the laughter of the carnival is the enemy of thinking, and perhaps it even grasps the world as it actually is.[221] The kinds of devils, fools, and wildmen that populate carnivalesque folk traditions across Europe elsewhere occupy a space that is not just humorous, but also deconstructionist as the system of the carnivalesque defies logical thinking and reason. This breakdown in meaning and sense that the mocking laughter and transgression of the carnivalesque represents undermines the

authority of institutions and authority figures while also symbolising the instinctive, impulsive, nonsense, and forgetting.

Framing an exhibition in this light clearly places the role of the folkloric carnivalesque art object as deconstructionist, even if the stance it takes appears to be for carnival *itself*. An art object framed in this mode does more than just provide evidence that something carnivalesque has occurred, it inserts imagination and fiction, extending the extra-ordinary in a discursive way. Everyday objects can take on peculiar comic meanings as carnivalesque props or disguises (as artworks). In these kinds of viewing modes exhibitions present objects, artefacts, and documentation that exist in a zone where they are serving as evidence of the carnivalesque, rather than actually being a setting for carnival itself. This crucially changes the context of the experience of the carnival from that of participatory involvement in a carnival event, such as witnessing the *Strawbear* or *May Man* in person, to a discursive one, when documentation and artworks surrounding events like these are experienced in a gallery context. When the *Strawbear* or the *May Man* processions are experienced in person, the distinction is between the carnivalesque performers of the rituals and their observers. There is a clear distinction between participant performers and those who are participant observers. However, in *The Scream of the Strawbear*, as these traditions were referenced in a secondary field, brought into the contemporary art space at Kunsthalle Gießen, there was another set of observers of the ritual, with more again observing later as the exhibition itself was documented in publications and online. These later viewings of the ritual are framed by the institution, the publishers of the catalogue, and myself as the artist,[222] each providing a different setting for reflection, discussion, and conceptual understanding of the works.

In my own works, the carnivalesque mode does not represent any complete carnival depiction, nor even an urge for revolution, but it is a mode that documents and surveys this impulse. The works are installations that sit in a presentation mode that, although not complete transformations of the everyday, engage in showing another, extra-ordinary point of view of the world and my own understandings of symbolic inversion as markers of an alternative kind of ordering. This framing of artwork-as-carnivalesque-documentation positions it as a site of cultural memory that can record the urge for carnivalesque engagement. It produces images of these features as open questions of what else the world could be. In this sense,

these versions of folklore-as-artwork bear witness to tradition and the carnivalesque in a new context, where an audience can re-look and re-engage with all the possibility that the carnivalesque might offer. In essence, my relationship with the carnivalesque relies on producing it as a document of something that has (or might have) happened. This is not a live event and I am not expecting any revolution to emerge from these stagings, but as evidence, the installations inhabit a quiet, transitional space. They are a place where the temporary wild chaos of the ritual has ended, paused in an in-between state before returning to the order of the everyday.

Axel Hoedt: *I'm more or less known as a fashion photographer, but I always felt like I'm doing more portraits because whenever I did a fashion shoot, the biggest problem was that the stylists always wanted me to shoot for lengths and with the shoes. Usually, if I'm doing a show or something, then I'm usually cropping at the waist. But if you let me loose, I always take portraits. For me, that was like the portrait job of the century [taking photographs of people disguised in carnival costumes] – taking a portrait of something that you actually do not know what it is.*

Matthew: *Yeah, yeah.*

Axel: *So that's the whole point. Is there one? Is there not one? I call it the casting of which masks appear in the books. If I don't like them, I've completely left out certain ones, and also didn't focus on the masks that were perhaps the most popular in a certain village. A lot of people at the time in Southern Germany said, "Well, that's not really representing the carnival", but that was not the point at all.*

5.2.3 The limits of revolution

Perhaps though, because of the clear potential of these alternative modes of speculation and imagination, the carnivalesque can become an overwrought term in artistic discourse that can easily lose its agency. When it is named as a speculative artistic tool, it is

often misconstrued as a revolutionary political urge, whereas the carnival itself is really a temporary suspension of the usual order of things.[223] Moments of laughter and symbolic inversions do not overthrow power themselves (they are often officially sanctioned "safety valves") but act as gestures towards the possible existence of other ways of constructing reality and the imagination of possible alternatives. A carnivalesque artwork can't assume responsibility for revolution itself, only with a reflection of the cultural desire for the qualities of the carnivalesque and its necessity for existing, as a reminder of its possibility as an idea. In this light, carnivalesque artworks can be understood as cultural documents, testing how knowledge may be accessed and shared. They make space for understanding humour, chaos, and instinct within the field of critical reflection.

The temporal zone of the carnivalesque mode, even when it is as documentation or artwork, is interesting because it represents a state of flux. Is the carnival mode reverting to order, or is the state of order reverting to the chaos of the carnival? Eagleton highlights the importance to the carnivalesque mode of this process of the return to order as a resettling into a normal state of being, after the provisional state of carnival has occurred.[224] This aftereffect of the carnival that, rather than creating deep systemic change in the world, folds itself back into the social order and the transgressions and utopias that it suggested have been tolerated precisely because they are temporary. This process of winding back to normality is an essential element in understanding the carnivalesque mode because it comes after the carnival, in a process of returning to a more familiar order of things. From an establishment point of view this might be a relief from the excess revels and even possible dangers that the carnival might represent, and so the resolution of the carnival seemingly reinforces the status quo. However, the return to order is rarely a complete reset, because while the structures of everyday life reassert themselves, the subjective experience of carnival participants has been permanently altered. The chance to reflect on these transgressions and freedoms offers a kind of psychological escape because it breaks the myth of the status quo's inevitability. Once the usual order of things has been mocked or temporarily inverted, its security becomes compromised. The order restored after the carnival is therefore not identical to the order that preceded it, as people have experienced alternatives.

This paradox, wherein inversion simultaneously destabilises and relies upon the system it critiques, is materialised in Mark

Wallinger's public sculpture *The World Turned Upside Down* (2019). Wallinger's giant, four-metre-high upside-down globe (a sculptural update of my own drawing on an upside-down world map), which was installed outside the London School of Economics in 2019, shows the world is turned on its North-South axis, as a familiar structural revolution **(Img. 78)**. This familiarity is interesting, because the motif of inversion, which I and many others have employed for artistic and satirical means, requires value and antithesis, a dichotomy that is difficult to avoid. Even when employed as transgression, as in Wallinger's globe, the system that is invoked is still intact, the globe itself is only rotated on its axis. It reveals the system that it questions, but it also reinforces it. What is interesting to note, as Richard William Hill points out his catalogue introduction for *The World Upside Down* exhibition that took place at the Banff Centre in 2006, is that transgressive inversions in art practice are in themselves actually a kind of norm.[225] They are an established path in a system of art practice that attempt to show, through transgressions and substitutions, where value is located and question what it is that holds the system in place.



78| Mark Wallinger, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 2019, painted cast bronze, diameter 4 m. Collection London School of Economics.

5.2.4 Carnival as art historical imperative

Not surprisingly, there is a rich history of engagement with the carnivalesque within artistic practices, from Renaissance grotesques through to Romantic and modern genre parodies, to the twentieth-century avant-gardes' embrace of nonsense, satire, and performative chaos. This is clearly evident in the performances at the Cabaret Voltaire, where Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara's absurd manifestos, and the strange cabarets of Emmy Hennings and many other Dada performances, operated in the mode of the carnivalesque in their grotesque humour and inversion of sense. Dada itself, however, did not claim any political revolution; rather, these performances were more like documents of a chaotic, reactive, and collective impulse, preserving nonsense and laughter as testimony against the horrors of the First World War.

The centenary of Dada's foundation has brought more focus onto its influence and position in the twentieth-century's timeline of art turns. In *Modernism, Dada, Postmodernism*, Richard Sheppard places it within a lineage of the avant-garde that can be traced towards contemporary readings of postmodernism. However, his description of Dada as "a latter-day inheritor of an oppositional, carnivalesque urge whose roots are very old and run very

deep"[226] exposes Dada's radical actions as an expression of the collective masquerade of the carnival, strongly contributing to the recalibration of what could be considered as art. Collage, anarchic performance, and radical costumes were characteristic of a movement that upturned aesthetic standards.

It is these performative and chaotic urges that underpins my own affinity for Dada (and its associated movements, such as the Vorticists). Understanding its clear antecedents in carnival and other kinds of characteristic costumed folk performance traditions therefore makes sense in understanding it as an avant-garde movement, engaging in instinctive oppositional urges and reactive inventiveness. It opens up other possible readings of contemporary folklore-as-artworks that are reactive and instinctive, rather that constitutive and productive in a linear sense. The carnivalesque has continued to be a recurring undercurrent in the search for rupture and reaction in later avant-gardes, always threatening the "serious" order of art with necessary destabilisation or redistribution.[227] What we can take from this, is that there is no one carnivalesque form, rather a mode that functions as a challenge, providing the freedom to remain foolish and to harness the instinctive power to mock hierarchy and to bring authority down to size.

This ongoing capacity of the carnivalesque to challenge dominant structures and re-frame socio-political crises was examined in the 2012 exhibition *Topsy-Turvy: Long Live the Upside-Down World* at de Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam, presenting a group of artists whose work suggested alternative carnivalesque ways of encountering the contemporary world.[228] The exhibition was structured around the idea of carnival festivals in Europe and dealt in works that were derived from satire and celebration. The show referenced themes that utilise the carnivalesque in order to view current political and financial predicaments from marginal artistic standpoints. In her accompanying essay, curator Ann Demeester noted contemporary confluences of carnival and protest movements, stating that "recently 'Occupiers' have enlivened their demonstrations with carnivalesque strategies: (V for Vendetta) masks, fancy dress parties, drum bands and theatrical campaigns".[229] These theatrical displays as an act of protest seem to confirm Bakhtin's assertion that the performance of carnival is only the act of temporarily practising a revolution, but significantly these references to carnival-style protests occur outside of the art gallery. The carnivalesque tactics of the early 2000s protest

movements were not artworks in a formal sense, but they did make use of performative artistic modes towards the goal of enacting political change, a difference characterised by John Hammond as "communal versus intentional" carnival.[230] But it is clear that in this practice of carnivalesque enactment, either as protest or artistic gesture, there is value in the carnival chaos and its representations in its ability to reflect social action.

It is clear, then, that as an artistic mode, the carnivalesque has its limits. Kester critiques what he calls the traditional avant-garde approach to the carnivalesque, arguing that artists that deal in shock and disruption often fail to reach any kind of transgressive potential that they seek. [231] For Kester, this model, where works are presented to an audience in a gallery space are neither literally revolutionary, offering only symbolic propositions to an audience who may or may not be engaged on any level in the work,[232] nor structurally defiant, where the artist fails to step outside the art system that they try to critique.[233] He reinforces the point that others have made, that carnivalesque motifs are a kind of traditional theme of contemporary art practice and almost represent the opposite of transgression, serving to uphold the status quo rather than instrumentalising any real-world effect.[234]

In my own works, however, I aim to frame the site of this carnivalesque energy as occurring somewhere else (although closely connected in time and place). The presence of the works in the gallery is not the event itself, but its documentation, which takes place through a variety of modes. In this configuration of an avant-garde *and* dialogical practice, my approach has been to orchestrate exhibitions that serve as multi-layered evidence as a speculative articulation of what has happened and what might yet occur. By combining views of the instinctive moment of the carnivalesque with the durational nature of a long-term community exchange, the exhibition can be a place where both unexpected and deeply engaged processes are both legible and present. This dual handling can be produced through careful framing of the show itself. While the collaborative production is described through contextual information, the presentation generates its own speculative outcomes. These suggestions may primarily play out within the viewer's imagination (or memory) or through dialogue, but my feeling is that the value of these kinds of installations is in their ability to serve as extra-ordinary, semi-factual celebrations of real communal events.

5.3 Special kinds of space-time

5.3.1 Shopping in reverse

79| A boy collecting sausages on a sword during the *May man* procession in Steinbrücken in 2019.

This spatial and temporal dislocation, where an extra-ordinary event occurs within everyday geography – yet operates according to an entirely different logic, finds its theoretical articulation in Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia. Heterotopias, as Foucault outlined, are real places that exist outside of daily norms: counter-sites where the usual orders of time, space, and social interaction are suspended or contested.[235] In folk rituals that take place on the street or in other public spheres, neighbourhoods may temporarily invert their usual order. Costumed public performances might interrupt daily routines and traffic, and the donations of goods (such as bacon and eggs at the *May Man* processions) or money, resist normal measures of commerce, appearing more like community charitable acts. A heterotopia operates by superimposing several incompatible spaces within a single location. An everyday street or footpath is temporarily layered with the symbolic structures of the folk ritual, re-mapping public space in the process.

By operating as both counter-sites and space and time breaks, folk rituals that happen at a particular time and place, such as those that take place annually, form Burrows and O'Sullivan's special kind of "space-time foregrounded out of the more ordinary and mundane".[236] These events create a unique temporal zone, distinct from everyday chronologies and routines. They exist outside the constraints of normal calendar time, bending and restructuring time and marking a threshold or a "privileged link"[237] between points that might otherwise remain disconnected. Within this frame, traditional folk events function as extra-ordinary interruptions in everyday life, as an alternative to the linear unfolding of hours and days. Burrows and O'Sullivan suggest that the heart of this break is contained in the suspension of habit. Habit, as a repetitive structural force that fixes our perception in patterns of the everyday, by definition excludes the strange, the extra-ordinary, and a connection to alternative potentialities. In the festival moment, however, this pattern of the everyday can be fractured. We engage with "a hesitation, a pause; a 'stopping of the world'",[238] during which other layers of time and tradition can be accessed. In these necessary fractures of the everyday, folk events do not simply provide entertainment or social connection, they operate as connections to other non-linear modes of time that look back to the past and forward to the future where communal memory and mythological story-making can be accessed and re-experienced.



In folk traditions such as the *May Man* and the *Strawbear*, the eggs and sausages that are donated by locals along the route of the procession operate as a form of "shopping in reverse". The public space is reconstituted as an economic heterotopia as doorways and footpaths become a counter-site where goods can flow outwards into the street as a kind of charitable ritual tribute. Similarly, when I performed mummers' plays with the Byker Mummers, we gratefully received beer money during and after performances. This was only a few pound coins collected as a response to an appeal with a hat at the end of the play in whatever space we appeared in. In both these examples though, and in many other forms of publicly performed folk ritual, these kinds of simple transactions happen towards the end of the spectacle as a reward or acknowledgement. But it is so common to appeal to an audience at the end of a folk ritual that it never occurred to me until recently to frame these as sites of alternative exchange; nevertheless, they do represent a counterpoint to the everyday market forces of daily life, as the currencies of folk ritual and performance operate according to different schemes of logic and order.

5.3.2 The spectator–participant divide

It is clear that when we are thinking about the "live" kind of carnivalesque mode, in the sense that Bakhtin outlined in his discussions of the medieval carnival,[239] there are certain limits on how it can be experienced in art practice. In our modern incarnations of folk ritual, such as the various examples cited in this research, the sense of a *total* carnivalesque mode is almost never experienced. The spectacle does not saturate the entire social realm in which it transpires; he whole space, that of the community, the village,



80| Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent*, 1559, oil on oak wood, 118 × 164 cm.



81| James Ensor, *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*, 1888, oil on canvas, 252.7 × 430.5 cm.

and the place that the tradition is played out in, is not totally given over to carnival and exuberant celebration, such as those where the village is given over to carnival in Bruegel's painting *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (**Img. 80**),[240] or the many carnival paintings of James Ensor (**Img. 81**). Sometimes, in traditional events, it is often a fight between the order of traffic and chaos, as streets are temporarily given over to parades or crowds. Passing cars or buses might intervene, but sometimes they themselves are held up for parades and crowds. There is an interruption in the usual order of things that allows for those participating to temporarily suspend the rules.

However, not all those who are present participate: often bystanders take no notice. The all-encompassing carnival world, where all participants relinquish the usual order of the world and submit to the topsy-turvy sense of the occasion is experienced in the twenty-first century perhaps only during large-scale music festivals such as Glastonbury and in encountering specific sites in city-wide carnivals such as the Cologne Carnival in Germany.

Bruce Phillips: *The thing about the experience [of watching the Burryman procession in South Queensferry] and what it means, was who turned up. I think that's a really good gauge of what this thing is. In the one I experienced, apart from me, there was only one or two other tourists who had heard about it. There was a pair of Americans who were in town, I think maybe in preparation for the festival. They had heard about it, were*

into traditions already, and they themselves were arrayed in punk paraphernalia, buttons and chains.

Apart from that, it was all just the local community. With something like this, which is quite otherworldly and spectacular, I would have thought it would have become a tourist thing, like the local council might have decided, "Oh, here's a really great marketing opportunity", and lured people in and created a marketing campaign. And yet, it's just their normal thing. Especially visiting the supermarket, everyone's just going on about their day. I'd catch snippets of conversation, like this young father and his son walking out of the supermarket and his son saying, "Oh, but what's going on?" And the father said, "Oh, it's just the Burryman" [laughs]. Maybe he's a tried-and-true local, maybe he grew up there, and it's just part of the fabric.

I guess the Burryman experience was definitely, as you say, the sense of magic, the power of being able to create a liminal space or a pause. It paused people's working lives. It paused capitalism. It drew attention away from those trappings that shape our world, those big levers that shape us. And it's just, you know, some man covered in [laughs] burrs and flowers.

Matthew: *Yeah. And stopping traffic, you know, the cars stop for him.*

Bruce: *I mean, in an interesting way, he had a police escort, and this is the thing – there were no road closures. This is just the Burryman's day, and he just goes where he likes. You could see the stress on the police officers trying to shepherd this unruly group of followers and kids. People in cars had to wait. I had a similar experience in Edinburgh, in Stockbridge, where they have a Santa parade down the street. It's unlike back home in New Zealand, where the Santa parade is a really commercialised thing. Whereas this was just... Santa could easily have been the Burryman, proceeding down the road in a proper sleigh towed by real reindeer. The community just walking behind, really similarly. There were no police [officers] there, they just held up traffic. The disobedience of that is beautiful.*

Matthew: *Yeah, and a really nice way to put it.*

Bruce: *As a curator, I find myself trapped into either rationalising the topical nature of art – its content that relates to the political sense, why should we be looking at it – or, on the flip side, going to a more formal discussion. Maybe other curators are able to do this, and maybe this is something I need to work on, but how do we describe this ritualistic magic? That's something that's not quite in my vocabulary to be able to communicate.*

Matthew: *Yeah. It's interesting. I think maybe what you're getting at is the kind of indescribable experience that happens in the presence of something like this. When it gets packaged up and redisplayed in a museum or as art, then it's in a completely different context and framing.*

It's not easy, but I guess there is something in these folk traditions like the Burryman, because from the point of view of the artworld they are quite out of place. They don't have a commercial value. They're not monetised, and they're not an object in any kind of way. And also, they kind of, like you say, have this pause about them; they stop things. So perhaps that's one way of thinking about it.

What we actually experience, in contrast to Bakhtin's theory of carnival, where everyone is sucked into the topsy-turvy-ness, is a more modern incarnation of the carnivalesque traditions where spectators and participants are divided. This is an important distinction to make, especially in relation to contemporary art, where the split between artwork and audience and their role as spectators is often central to the understanding of the work. It is a limit to the application of Bakhtin's total carnival mode, as the experience of an exhibition presenting traditional folkloric material with elements of the carnivalesque, the artwork is a step further removed from a true carnivalesque experience, if it ever was that in the first place. This lack of breaching the threshold of a total carnival situation is another limit in the ability for us to understand the carnivalesque potential for revolution. If the majority of people who view the event are not involved in it as participants, but rather as observers, what is the effect? And what then of the implications for art practice, if we are

already dealing with something that is a step removed from the promise of revolution? It is another realisation that the carnival can really only represent a fantasy of revolution.

5.3.3 Carnival as document

This spectator-participant divide, materialises in Hew Locke's vast sculptural installation, *Procession* (**Img. 82**), which was presented as a commission at Tate Britain in London 2022, as a carnival procession of more than 100 sculpted figures.[241] Constructed from multiple materials, formally, the work freezes the carnival for the audience's inspection, but there are so many details involved in the costumes and the masks that it is not possible to grasp everything all at once. The details of the costumes and masks of each figure invite viewers to examine them, but not too closely, as the pieces are sometimes demarcated by tape marked out on the floor of the gallery. The effect is to make the audience move around the carnival itself, without being able to touch it. Touch though, is very much a part of the carnival instinct, but is not usually permitted in a gallery, another indication that the works are document-like.

As a document of carnival, the work functions on an enormous scale, a mise-en-scène of a dream-like march of humanity. In this sense the piece deeply draws from the carnivalesque, but doubles down on the demarcation of audience and participants to invite layered readings of de-colonial, economic, and environmental themes, all common to Locke's practice. The human scale of the sculptural figures as they move metaphysically through time and space invite this sense of interest. As audiences walk around the procession, there is a chance to examine it as if the sound, movement, and music had been paused. This position invites multiple readings of who the figures are or who they represent (many are related to Locke's own British Caribbean autobiography, but many also are universal figures). The masked figures act as unreliable documenters, as it is not clear what the masks hide, or whether they are depictions of real faces. *Procession* is an artistic vision of the carnival itself, operating in another dimension, one in which we are allowed to join as viewers, but only as long as we don't step over the tape on the floor.

In contrast to Locke's installation, Andrea Fraser's *Um Monumento às Fantasias Descartadas (A Monument to Discarded Fantasies)* (**Img. 83**), from 2003, deals directly in this after-the-carnival state. In Fraser's work, Brazilian carnival costumes, masks, and

party props are discarded and piled up as a monument to carnival itself. These items become emblems of the possible transgressions, revelry, and freedoms of the carnival, but provide a clear metaphor for the artwork as a post-carnival monument.

For me, this realisation provides a framework for expanding on the presentation of the carnivalesque in folklore-as-artwork. If it is possible to read an exhibition as a piece of evidence of the carnivalesque, it can be seen as a monument to the carnivalesque state of flux. In doing so, an exhibition can operate as a heterotopic counter-site where two distinct modes of enquiry – that is, the instinctive, bodily energy of ritual performance and the reflective, discursive analysis of artistic research – can run simultaneously. By encountering these objects in a state of pause between chaos and order, the audience is invited not to participate in an active revolution, but to reflect on the lingering possibilities of a world briefly turned upside-down.



82| Hew Locke, *The Procession,* 2022, mixed media installation, site-specific commission at Tate Britain, London.

5.4 Wildness Makes This World

5.4.1 Grandeur and unpredictability

If the mode of folk traditions and rituals we experience today leans more towards a performed carnivalesque, the productive capability of the carnivalesque mode in folk rituals lies in our ability as an audience to carry away, process, and reflect on what we observe. This realisation was in mind as I developed *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2020. The exhibition dealt psychologically with the state of wildness, a quality that I wanted to address as something I felt was inherent to the specific chaos of the carnivalesque. This idea of wildness at the centre of the exhibition project stemmed from observations of traditions such as the *Strawbear* and the *May Man* which had taken place the preceding year, in 2019, in my exhibition project at Kunsthalle Gießen.

Such folk rituals create a moment of spectacle that unfolds as chaotic and wild in marking meaning in place between audiences and participants.[242] The focus of my interest in wildness comes from accessing this communal carnivalesque instinct for chaos, but as I began to work on *Wildness Makes This World*, I was 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.

More specifically, in the Finnish context in Seinäjoki, I was interested in the kinds of wildness encompassed in the idea of "raivoisuus", which evokes the wildness and unpredictability you might find in a wild animal, as well as in "jylhyys", which evokes more of the grandeur of the natural environment. These understandings seemed to shift the idea of wildness from the social dimensions of chaos to an understanding of wildness that stemmed from nature and the environment.[243] 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.



83| Andrea Fraser, *Um Monumento às Fantasias Descartadas (A Monument to Discarded Fantasies)*, 2003, Brazilian Carnival costumes.

Usual definitions of wildness, such as unpredictability or an absence of domestically controlled order, firstly separate the idea of wildness from the realm of naturalness, thereby defining it as a process, quality, or mode. It can then usually be assigned in one of two ways; that is, firstly, that wildness is as an other, something that represents a threshold; or secondly, that wildness is a tonic, an inspiration or a state of being or place that people are drawn to, something that might provide insight.[244] William Cronon suggests though that wildness "can be found anywhere".[245] 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.[246] However, both these approaches to wildness rely on accepting it as something that is beyond being totally understood or made tangible. As an exhibition, *Wildness Makes This World* did not provide answers to this intangibility; rather, it was evidence that knowing wildness when you experience it is a universal acknowledgement. As one of the elements of the mode of the carnivalesque, we can slip into wildness through experience of a situation or environment. Through observation and reflection of such experiences we can continue to unlock this mode and its qualities both through imagined worlds and in reality.[247]

5.4.2 Preserving the carnivalesque impulse

Exhibition as a site for artistic reflection is one way of taking note of the instinctive present of the carnivalesque mode, framing its occurrence as a document and contributing to an understanding of what has taken place as a result of the carnivalesque happening. This meeting of the reflective mode of exhibition practice and the instinctive mode of the carnivalesque has the chance to generate

speculative possibility. However, this tension also highlights the limits of carnival as a tool for actual revolution, a point of caution raised by both Bakhtin and Eagleton. Kester takes this critique even further by questioning whether the shock of the carnivalesque is only an empty gesture.

However, in treating the carnivalesque as a speculative mode there is a chance to provide the imagination necessary for other kinds of processes to unfold. Exhibitions can act in a dual mode of documentation and speculation that preserve what has happened as an *impulse* for thinking about future possibilities. Artworks have the potential to invoke fiction and imagine other modes of experience, and in doing so they offer a chance to reconnect with the original meaning of the carnivalesque as audiences envision situations in which the artwork might function. In this sense, these artworks operate not as carnival itself, but more as an archive of its energy.



84| Exhibition view of *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2021, showing *Wildman Who Walks*, 2020, walking stick, pantaloons, textiles, mannequin, wooden stand.

Exhibitions that bring such works together can function as heterotopic archives, documenting how there is an innate human draw towards the qualities of the carnivalesque, while acknowledging that the revolutionary possibilities on offer are there to stimulate imagination and offer the chance to speculate about possible alternatives. It is an acknowledgement that the carnivalesque mode persists as a cultural necessity in an endless variety of forms. Folklore-as-artwork does not need to be instrumental in a revolutionary sense in order to be productive, as it can deal in estrangement that makes the ordinary hierarchies of the world suddenly visible.

Folklore-as-artwork can act as a register of this enduring human need for laughter, parody, and destabilisation, serving as a reminder that other ways of knowing remain possible. Exhibiting carnivalesque artworks does not replace lived social transformation but situates the audience within a space where the hierarchies of normal order can be observed to momentarily loosen. The aftereffect of the carnival can then be a shared state of questioning in a space where, through laughter and the ridiculous, we are briefly allowed to see the world not as it is, but as it might otherwise be. To stage and document the carnivalesque in an exhibition is therefore to cross the threshold to the knowledge of disorder, play, and many other unfinished possibilities.

209 Harrop and Roud, *English Folk Performance*, 11.

210 Reginald John Elliott Tiddy, *The Mummers' Play* (Clarendon Press, 1923; repr., Oxford University Press, 1969), 183.

211 Peter Millington, "The Origins and Development of English Folk Plays" (National Centre for English Cultural Tradition, University of Sheffield, 2002).

212 Herman Pleij and Diane Webb, *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life* (Columbia University Press, 2001).

213 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Het Luilekkerland* (The Land of Cockaigne), 1567, oil on wood panel, 51.5 cm × 78.3 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.

214 Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Penguin Books, 1991), 17.

215 This was my Standard One classroom, Room 11 at Mellons Bay Primary School, Auckland, in 1981.

216 This idea is explored in the TV series *Stranger Things*, where the parallel dark world that mirrors our own reality is literally called the upside-down.

217 Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008), 7.

218 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 13.

219 Eagleton, *Humour*, 31.

220 Hyman and Malbert, *Carnivalesque*, 10. This would also apply in Finland and many parts of northern Germany.

221 Eagleton, *Humour*, 33.

222 Matthew Cowan, *The Scream of the Strawbear*, with Kunsthalle Gießen and Oberhessisches Museum (EECLECTIC, 2023).

223 Bakhtin and Iswolsky, *Rabelais and His World*, 15.

224 Eagleton, *Humour*, 12.

225 Doris Cowan et al., eds., *The World Upside down, Le Monde à l'envers – Richard William Hill* (Walter Phillips Gallery, 2008), 11.

226 Richard Sheppard, *Modernism, Dada, Postmodernism* (Northwestern University Press, 2000), 206.

227 Paul O'Kane, "The Carnival of Popularity", *Third Text Online*, 19 September 2019, www.thirdtext.org/okane-carnival.

228 Curated by Ann Demeester and Hilde de Bruijn at De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam, the exhibition *Topsy-Turvy: Long Live the Upside-Down World!* (26 May – 23 September 2012) included work by Matthew Barney, Maja Borg, Spartacus Chetwynd, Melanie Bonajo, Discoteca Flaming Star, James Ensor, Melanie Gilligan, Adriana Lara, David Lloyd, Urs Lüthi, Philip Metten, Alberto de Michele, Wendelien van Oldenborgh, Hélio Oiticica, Ugo Rondinone, Markus Selg, Berend Strik, Toshie Takeuchi, Eric de Vroedt, Niko de Wit and Tori Wrånes.

229 Ann Demeester, *Topsy Turvy Exhibition Guide* (De Appel, 2012), 5.

230 John L. Hammond, "Carnival against the Capital of Capital: Carnivalesque Protest in Occupy Wall Street", *Journal of Festive Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 265–88, https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2020.2.1.47. 265

231 Kester, *One and the Many*, 11.

232 Grant Kester, "The Sound of Breaking Glass, Part II: Agonism and the Taming of Dissent", *e-flux journal*, no. 31 (December 2011), 3.

233 Grant H. Kester, *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde* (Duke University Press, 2023), 4.

234 Doris Cowan et al., *World Upside down*, 11.

235 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

236 Burrows and O'Sullivan, *Fictioning*. 91

237 Burrows and O'Sullivan, *Fictioning*, 91.

238 Quoting a phrase used by Carlos Castaneda in Burrows and O'Sullivan, *Fictioning*, 91.

239 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*. 7

240 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Het gevecht tussen Carnaval en* Vasten [The fight between Carnival and Lent], 1559, oil on wood panel, 118 cm × 164 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

241 Hew Locke, *The Procession*, 2022, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, Tate Britain, London, https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/hew-locke.

242 Cowan, "Wildness Makes This World", 134.

243 Cowan, "Wildness Makes This World", 135.

244 Lawrence J. Cookson, "A Definition for Wildness", *Ecopsychology* 3, no. 3 (2011): 188, https://doi.org/10.1089/eco.2011.0028.

245 William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (W.W. Norton, 1996), 24.

246 Cowan, “Wildness Makes This World”, 136.

247 Cowan, “Wildness Makes This World”, 136.

VI.

LICKING THE GLASS CASE



6.1 The things that are stuck in there

6.1.1 Feeling the museum

Visiting the museum with my family as a child made a big impression on me, although my understanding of what the museum was overlapped onto the way that I understood what a zoo was, perhaps because there were many stuffed animals on display on the natural history floor of the museum I knew. We used to visit the Auckland Museum, which is a historical museum containing important collections of Māori and Pacific artefacts that also serves as a war memorial and a natural history museum. My understanding of the museum as a place where you go to look at things also came with the provision that the animals and objects on display were stuck there, not alive, but dead. It also seemed to me that what was shown at the museum must have had a special status by being there. They had somehow ended up there under systems of classification and presentation that I did not yet understand as a child, save for the fact that it was important to look at them.

Looking back, these museum-visiting experiences are connected to my original childhood sense-memories. These are impressions that are strongly connected with touch, mainly of the solid, cold edges and corners of display cases and plinths and most likely the imprints of my forehead and nose (or perhaps even tongue) on the glass. Cultural historian of the senses Constance Classen points out that the conventional "high culture" of the museum frowns upon the engagement of the "lower" senses of corporeality.[248] Despite this, touch is still an instinctive urge for most people in the museum, without even noticing it. Of all the kinds of touch that Classen lists: *inquisitive, playful, reverent, caressing, defiant*, and *photographic*,[249] it is this last one that I realise continues to engage me most as I move through museums. Now, instead of the feeling of my forehead on the glass case, I slide my phone case onto the glass to get as close as possible to what is inside. In the act of photographing there is a different sense of touching; once removed, I can touch the object on my own glass screen.

6.1.2 A stranger in the museum or the museum is a stranger?

Encounters with numerous unfamiliar objects on display were an early introduction to the museum as what cultural theorist and philosopher Peter Sloterdijk calls "a cultural strategy of dealing with what is strange".[250] That is, a museum visit inevitably involves an interaction and connection to "the other". Unfamiliar objects from

85| Exhibition view of *Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots* at Braunschweiges Landesmuseum in 2016, showing the work *Courier*, 2016, "Amor nature" condoms, safety pins, white trousers, white coat, white shoes, gloves, bow tie, hat, wooden staff.

the past are presented as part of a specialised process that elevates their status as indicative and revealing. Even as it has developed from classical glass vitrines to digital technologies, the visual language of museum presentation asks us to look at objects in ways that are prescribed by literal security and distance, also revealing the sense of the aura and trace of objects on display.[251] Being required to look in these ways is part of what constitutes the strangeness, a realisation that is also relevant to how we might look at artworks that are inserted into a museum setting. Experiencing objects in a museum involves a multi-directional process of looking "in/into/around/through/out/over" as you move around the space, beginning the kinds of sensorial explorations that construct understanding of the objects you are looking at.[252] The museum attempts to persuade visitors to move through the space in a form of "organised walking";[253] however, paying attention to sensory rather than representational experiences in the museum feels like an important place to begin thinking about an artistic position in relation to the idea of the museum.

6.1.3 Glass and danger

Central to this sensory negotiation is the presence of the glass itself. Throughout this artistic practice of working with museums, I have gone through a process of taking things out of glass cases and putting things into them. Before working with artworks in a museum context, it was not something I had reason to often consider and so I questioned why the convention in museum presentation was to revert at every opportunity to show objects in glass vitrines, when in contemporary art spaces similarly valuable art objects are presented without barriers. The glass highlights museum convention versus gallery convention in the methods of presentation but also the conventional behaviours of audiences. Objects in a glass vitrine are framed and therefore protected, their value underscored by their placement. A contemporary sculpture, however, is not held behind glass and so transgresses these rules. Having no glass to secure it means that it can be observed and experienced in proximity, the fragility of its newness on full display.

The role of the glass is as a dual protector, securing an object from the viewers' touch and other transgressions while also protecting viewers from the object itself. A glass box creates a neutral enclosure for objects, recalling church vitrines that held holy relics and framed the sacred for public view. In time, this role was also



86| Pfeifensammlung [pipe collection], nineteenth and twentieth centuries, hunter and reservist pipes, on display at the Oberhessisches Museum, 2019.

adopted by science and medicine, where glass holds specimens in suspension, kept safe but still accessible, controlled but never fully removed from their potential danger.[254]

As one recent example, Classen relays the experience of staff at the British Museum in 2011, as it presented the exhibition *Treasures of Heaven*, which presented many bodily remains of medieval saints in elaborate glass vitrines. The glass surfaces of these containers attracted many visitors who sought direct contact with what was inside. Consequently, Classen explains, staff were "kept busy wiping kiss marks off the glass cases in which the reliquaries were displayed".[255]

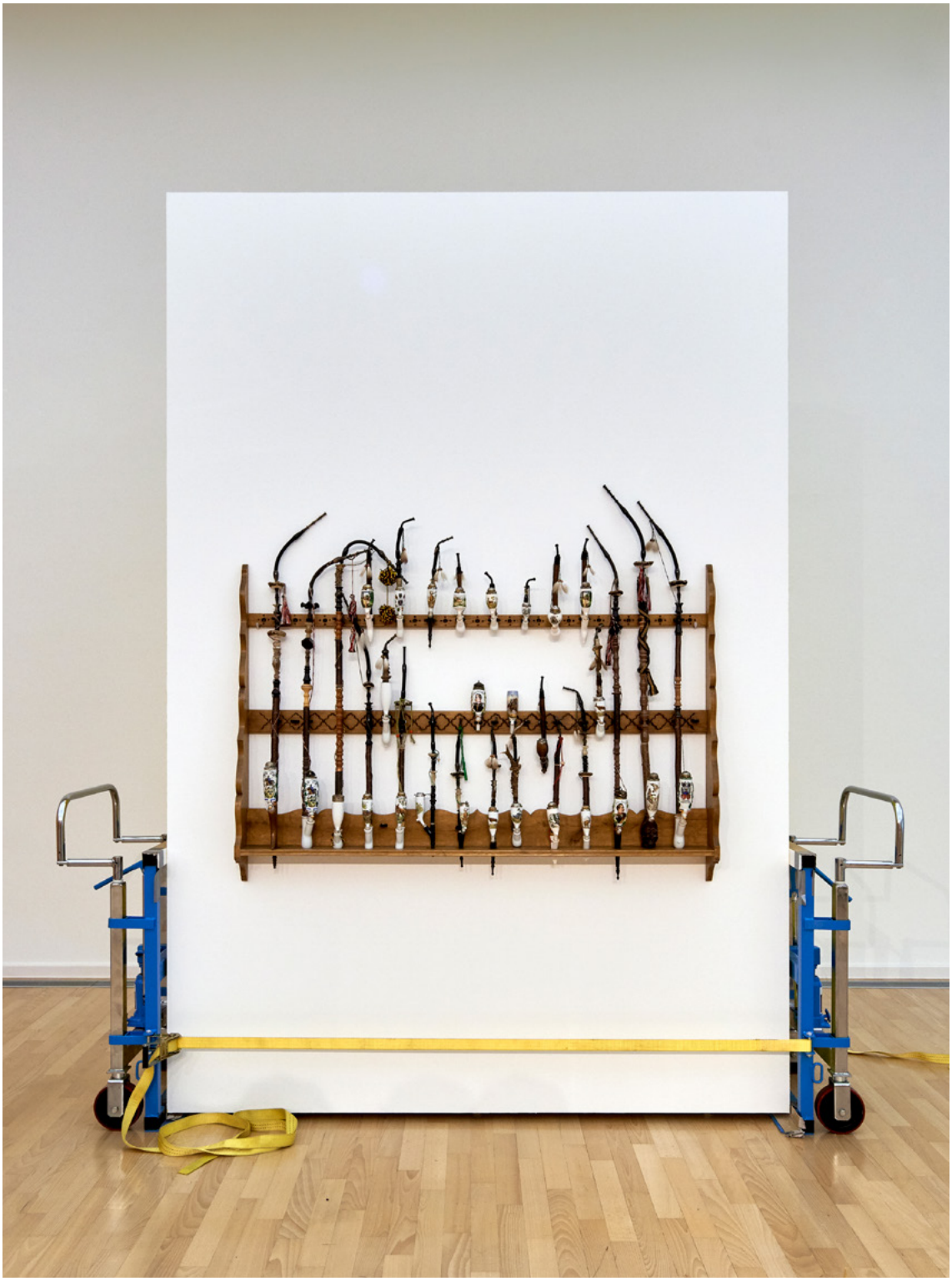
In short, the glass vitrine in the museum operates as more than just a transparent frame, it is a cultural device that negotiates the edges of object and observer and past and present. By dictating how audiences may approach and perceive an object, glass vitrines both safeguard value and construct the meaning around the objects they contain.

Simon Costin: *Also, people have a very strong physical reaction to things like the curses in the Museum of Witchcraft sometimes, depending on how sensitive they are. So they are quite glad that they are behind glass. And possibly, you wouldn't want those things out anyway. They would decay because they have lots of fabrics and natural materials.*

Navigating these boundaries between protection and access has become a recurring motif in my work. Since being confronted with the problem of how to display objects, when glass has been a necessary condition of their presentation in the museum, I have made use of the display as a framing device. For *Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots*, historic wooden and glass vitrines were listed in the exhibition as objects in themselves. I tried to think of the windows in the vitrines as lenses that allow the viewer to focus on looking at what is inside in a certain way, making use of all the connotations of historic museum displays and the expectations an audience has of how these displays are presented. The collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century hunter and reservist pipes (the *Pfeifensammlung*) that were part of the installation at Kunsthalle Gießen for *The Scream of the Strawbear*, on the other hand, were objects that were removed from their cases and placed in a new art context. This removal from a vitrine felt like a transformative act as the conditions of lighting, the possible viewing angles, and the proximity to the object are all different, allowing for a closer kind of viewing or even smelling experience. At the very least, when an object is not behind glass it is possible to add smell to the range of senses that can access it.

6.1.4 The artefacts are alive

In remembering the feeling of what it was like to be a child inside a large museum building, I realise the connection of museum artefacts to imagination. The artefacts inside the glass cases can act as prompters for imagining what journey they might have made on their way to ending up in a museum display or who might have used them.[256] Artefacts that end up in museums are trapped there and then presented as essentially dead things. Perhaps at least on one level my naïve understanding of the resonance of museum objects was connected to their uncanniness, the concept that Freud developed from a confusion about whether an object is alive or dead.[257] This confusion derives from the sense that perhaps it is alive after all, if you look at it long enough.[258] In many cases this sense has a consequence for museums' display of objects from Indigenous and other communities that do indeed feel that some of their cultural artefacts remain alive. Awareness in European and Western museums is slowly catching up with this aspect of their collection care and handling, the best display practice for such items, and, in some cases, programmes of repatriation of artefacts and collections to the communities they belong to.



This connection between museums and death is accounted for by art theorist Boris Groys in returning to the common comparison between museums and cemeteries.[259] But in this metaphor, museums take a step further than cemeteries, as they expose the dead artefact to viewers, revealing its pastness and the impossibility of it belonging to the present, another quality that makes up the estrangement of museum objects. The metaphor can even be extended even further, as Sloterdijk does, by realising that objects that have made it into a museum collection have achieved a degree of preserved immortality.[260] This compares to an understanding of a defining characteristic of artworks, in that any completed artwork also belongs to the past, therefore overlapping into the status of historical object. As opposed to art objects though, we have a sense that the objects that are in a historical museum are therefore in their final resting place.

This institutional imperative to exclude the living becamea literal condition of production as I worked on *Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots* in 2016. The large straw lion that I constructed at the centre of the exhibition was literally a reflective piece in the show, because it looked at itself in a mirror and was a soft, temporary version of the hypermasculine rigid bronze lion that stood just outside the museum.[261] I learned during the process of planning for the exhibition that the straw we were going to use for the show needed to be frozen for a number or weeks before we could use it. This process was necessary in order to eliminate any insects that might be alive in the straw and cause damage to other artefacts in the museum. The straw, which I often use as a material due to its aesthetic cheapness and availability, became deathly special in this instance. It was transported to Hannover for freezing and then returned to Braunschweig some weeks later, completely dead, and safe for use in the museum. Although this piece had only an ephemeral existence in my exhibition setting, it reflected the imperative that nothing living belongs in the museum.



87| Exhibition view of *The Scream of the Strawbear* at Kunsthalle Gießen in 2019, showing the *Pfeifensammlung* [pipe collection] (see img. 86), nineteenth and twentieth centuries, hunter and reservist pipes.

88| Exhibition view of *Wandle auf Rosen und Vergissmeinnicht / Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots* at Braunschweiges Landesmuseum in 2016, showing *Lion*, 2016, wood, straw, wire.

6.1.5 The nature of the mise-en-scène

I once visited a large historical museum in China that presented very few authentic artefacts, instead relying on theatrical replicas and painted scenery to present a historical narrative. It made me realise that all museum exhibitions have an element of the theatrical, their architecture of display giving rise to the performance of the knowledge they hold.[262] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes

museum displays of artefacts as either "in situ" or "in context".[263] An in situ display makes use of the theatrical and would include dioramas, period rooms, and other mimetic re-creations of scenes. An in-context display would be objects arranged according to conceptual frames of reference – such as a taxonomy, evolutionary sequence, or historical development – as a set of formal relationships. These two modes of display differ in their approach to the performativity of objects and the nature of their mise-en-scène. Labels and contextual notes for both modes are usually part of the presentation, becoming an element of how we read the exhibition.

Evaluating museum presentation in these terms, along a spectrum of their inherent theatricality, shows that there is always artifice in museum presentations. No artefact was intended specifically to be presented as a museum object, but artwork that is inserted into the museum is done so intentionally. The interplay between these two kinds of "objects" in the institutional space mirrors the spectrum from authentic to fictional, past to future, and known to imagined.

6.2 Whose history? Re-evaluations and re-orientations

6.2.1 Re-evaluating the museum, power, and ambivalence

Critiques of museums often begin with a question of whose history is being presented, or on what assumptions does the museum's point of view stand? Museums, characteristically, are involved with the re-presentation (and continuing preservation) of particular elements of history and society, although these, by their nature, are contested constructions of political, social, and cultural ideas. Many museums in Europe, particularly national and regional ones founded in the nineteenth century, still operate with traces of institutional authority that reflect the values of a very different era, but museums continue to occupy important cultural positions in shaping current and contemporary formations of societies.

In analysing how this institutional authority is maintained through display structures, cultural theorist Tony Bennett compares twentieth-century museums to "machineries of modernity", processing, conscripting, and collecting their objects to function as "centres of calculation."[264] On the one hand, museums project a sense of certainty and order and usability in the systems and stability of traditional museum display as they seem to allow for a past that is known, classified, and subjugated. But in reality, these

certainties are sometimes hopelessly incomplete, reflecting gaps and prejudices about what is on display, only reflecting a subset of values along the lines of the ideology of the institution. There is a tension between the possibility of presenting the entirety of what is known and the particular and partial limits of presenting this universality in museum displays.[265] Museums by their nature present curated versions of truth that uphold the perspectives and power relations of the societies that sustain them. The process of who and what museums represent, and how they wield the knowledge that they produce as a form of cultural authority is an ongoing debate. Museums are increasingly understood as value-laden spaces, operating as active participants in the broader social, political, and epistemic structures that sustain them.

Despite the biases and social dynamics in which museums operate, re-evaluations of what museums could be have started to recognise and understand their ambiguity. Although the point of museums, as they are understood in Europe, is that real and true artefacts make up their collections, some of which are then put on display, the reality is that we only experience this actuality of the object, mostly isolated and out of context, in a deeply artificial way. In realising this, critical museologist Jen Walklate points out that museums are heteroclites, "neither wholly negative, nor wholly positive but deeply ambivalent and flawed",[266] highlighting this ambiguity at the heart of the museum's reason for being. Despite these complications of presentation at the heart of the idea of the museum, core practices continue across most museums in some form of collecting, conserving, labelling, displaying, and educating. Most critiques focus on expanding the possibilities of what a museum can be, beyond traditional boundaries, by beginning to recognise the limits of what is institutionally possible and emphasising a pluralist point of view that includes dialogue with audiences and inclusive programming.

6.2.2 Re-orientations from past to future

But what of artistic processes in relation to the museum and its objects, such as artistic research that deals not with the past but with fiction and future-oriented speculation? It seems that one answer is to return to the prompter function of both artefacts and artworks. That is, if an object displayed as artefact or as artwork can generate imagination or speculation, then it is at least capable of changing our experience of that present moment and reorienting

us to understand a different possible present and future. It is at this point that I think the real possibility of an artistic gesture has traction in working in the museum context as it removes the necessity for placing artefacts in systems of display and taxonomies of the past; instead, it can replace these systems with imagination and speculation.

Matthew: *In my experience, when I've made costumes, the shoes are a really big signifier of authenticity. Are they cheap sports shoes or are they older men's leather shoes with leather soles? It really changes how people see what the costume is. Maybe it's a bit different with your archive because they're costumes that have been used and performed with a lot, but shoes tell a big story. But how did you come to make this costume archive in the first place?*

Chloe Metcalf: *Between 2005 and 2009, before I left home to study costume making (at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London), I would spend a lot of time watching videos of folk dance groups on YouTube. I'd be looking at all these beautiful costumes from other nations and I would wonder, "Where is my folk costume? What clothing represents Englishness?"*

When I was 16, doing my "Duke of Edinburgh" silver award was the catalyst I needed to join my first morris team. It was an all-women's "border" team called Queen's Oak and it still has a great costume, which hasn't changed since they were formed in 1982. Being in a team and getting to wear a special costume still didn't stop me from thinking about and actually sketching out different costume ideas. The question of what is folk costume, especially within an English context, is something which continues to interest me to this day.

I kept the English Folk Costume Archive for ten years from 2015 to 2025, amassing about 250 items largely from teams who had folded. I had intended to keep the archive for longer, but then I started a family and ran out of free time!

I started collecting costumes when it became apparent that there was not much interest in keeping worn morris

costumes in local, let alone national museums. This is, I think, emblematic of the wider malaise when it comes to appreciating English folk culture. Morris dance costumes can be seen as a tangible representation of attitudes towards heritage, folklore, history, nationhood, community, and belonging. In the end, I was delighted to be able to re-home the collection. Most of the items were donated to Simon Costin for his Museum of British Folklore whilst a few went to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

6.2.3 Folklore collections and the zone of the unreal

Folklore collections still feel underrepresented in museums across Europe in most contexts. Clearly, folklore's vitality lies in live traditions and its intangibility, fluidity, and embeddedness in living communities are aspects of culture that are difficult to represent institutionally. There is also the contested field of folklore itself, with the definition of what constitutes folklore differing across Europe, and the academic field of folklore itself falling between disciplines. Unlike more tangible historic objects or natural history specimens, folklore often encompasses the elusive – ephemeral songs, rituals, oral traditions, gestures, and lived practices that are hard to present in a traditional static display.

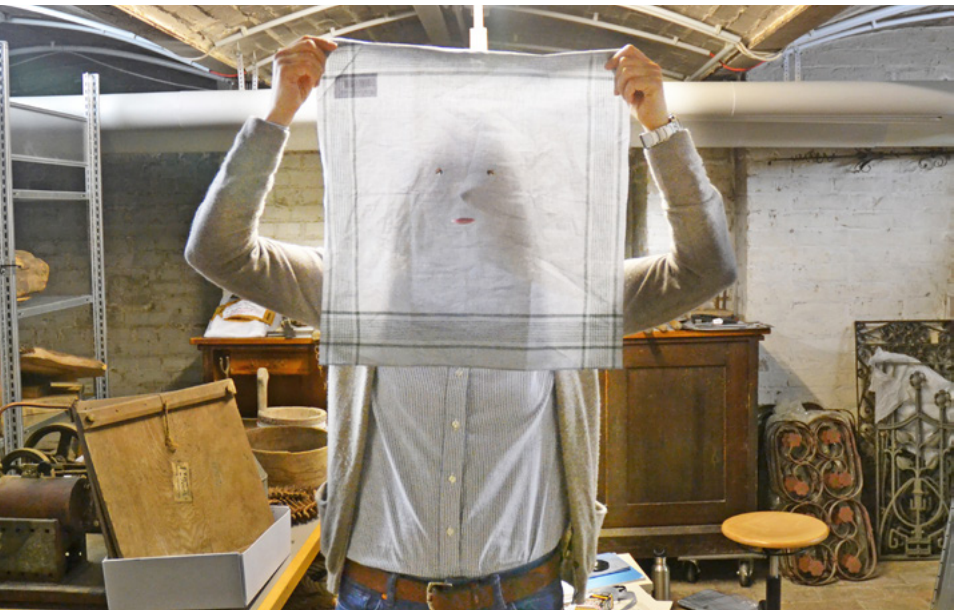
As museums contend with how to present intangible cultural heritage in ways that resonate authentically with living communities, the impermanent and live qualities of folklore can lead to a neglect of its specificity and richness. The process of collecting, documenting, and archiving folklore thus demands a specialised attentiveness to forms of expression that are situational and performative. This temporal quality poses unique challenges to conventional museum methods that are oriented towards preservation and objectification. But conversely, in this gap there are opportunities for artistic engagement in animating collections of objects that can seem disconnected from their original contexts.

The folklore collections of the two large German museums that I worked with for this project, in Giessen and Braunschweig, both had no dedicated curator for their *volkskunde* collections. I had many questions about the artefacts and collections. As director of the Oberhessisches Museum in Giessen, Katharina Weick-Joch wrote in the exhibition catalogue: "the museum's archives and

the museum staff were not able to answer many of [these] questions because detailed histories of the objects are missing in almost all cases."[267] Both museums also had few resources for research at the time that I came to work with them. In many ways, the animation of these collections through the small collection of objects that I worked with was a political gesture in acknowledging the value of these objects and the histories that they represented.

In Europe, larger collections of folklore are most often held by ethnographic museums that tend to offer comparative presentations of traditional folklore. What is collectable and what is presented though remains in the zone of the unreal, where the visible artefacts of folklore that are often on view in major museums – such as painted kitchen utensils, local costumes, and arrangements of agricultural tools – are shown on mannequins and in glass cases. These kinds of presentations, which rely on static display, can fail to present folklore's complexity, dynamism, and "aliveness".

Alternatively, folklore is also presented and even performed in Europe in open air museums. In these museums, the focus is more on a kind of live experience that is not possible in the traditional architecture of a historical museum. What the open-air museum gains from the theatrical and the feeling of existing in a setting that can feel like a film set, is an experiential quality if not an encounter with authenticity of artefacts. But museum settings of folklore, whether in a traditional historic or ethnographic setting or in the more flexible setting of an open-air museum, both struggle with the paradox at the heart of a museum: how to present the real in an unreal setting?



89| Kirsten Bernhardt with a *handkerchief mask*, in progress, in the folklore collection storage rooms at the Braunschweiges Landesmuseum in 2019.

Mellany Robinson: *It's that kind of disconnect and fetishisation of museum objects. It's like the pinned butterfly thing, isn't it? You end up killing it to keep it. Obviously, we always are very clear about the fact that seasonal traditions are living and evolving, constantly changing, or dying out, and new ones coming. So, again, there's a challenge there because museums are not set up in that way to deal with this kind of constant flux. It's not what they're for traditionally.*

Matthew: *Yeah.*

Mellany: *That's shifting, but [is] something else to consider as well.*

Matthew: *But I think that's another great thing about what you guys have been able to do at The Museum of British Folklore. You can afford to bring living objects into your conceptual space, and then they go back to people again. It perfectly fits with the framework of the subject you're dealing with, which is that very often, the costumes or whatever don't last long, or they're not built to do that. They're for performing in for a few years and for that year.*

Mellany: *Yes.*

6.2.4 ICOM redefines what a museum is

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) is the main global body responsible for overseeing and agreeing standards, ethics, and professional strategies of museums. After a long and involved process of consultation, they recently updated their definition of what a museum is in order to better reflect the multiple communities and focuses of museums in contemporary societies. Their new definition, adopted in 2022, runs as follows:

> A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits its tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible

> and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.[268]

This new definition reflects the reconfiguring of the social role that museums play in society, moving from the previous functional and historical position to a more inclusive one. But also, increasingly in relation to the political changes we have seen in society in recent generations, there is now an allowance for a multitude of diverse, accessible, and inclusive perspectives in understanding what museums could be. These discussions capture the growing but necessary examination of the museum as a contested and politicised space.

It is important that museums as institutions are reflective of these the histories of how they and their collections came into being and continue to ask questions about their place in society. How *research* takes place in the museum and how it is accepted as such are interesting questions, particularly for artists, and they are likely related to how museums go about incorporating this *accessible and inclusive* point of view. But it also seems important that the new definition's inclusion of the criterion "in the service of society" is a perspective that acknowledges the multiplicities of contemporary society and re-configures historic power dynamics and colonial and Eurocentric legacies.

A number of heritage professionals have responded to ICOM's new definition. For instance, memory and museums researcher Colin Sterling notes that the new ICOM definition may seem to have evolved to include progressive points of view, but as our geopolitical climate (he was writing in 2024) already seems to be fighting against such progressive steps, the idea of what a museum *is* faces challenging times.[269] As an anthropologist and museum curator, Nicholas Thomas recognises that the challenge of museums is not in attempting to solve political problems, but in a social investment, such as Thomas Piketty's call for enhancing education and skills as a pathway to making a contribution to the world.[270] In this light, it is interesting to return to my own memories of visiting the museum as a child, and the kind of skills that I had at my disposal. I realise that my original relationship to museums as holders of strange objects corresponds more closely with an etymology of the word museum itself – which stems from Ancient Greek, the seat

of the muses.[271] But in realising that museums reconcile a sense of creativity with a sense of order, and curiosity alongside scholarship, the collection itself can become a technology[272] that enables new things to be made and imagined.

Mellany Robinson: *I think museums have an important social role to play. I'm particularly interested in how they can change culture and attitudes and be active and living, contributing to the debate. They have to have the conversations, instead of being these monolithic organisations and structures that just collect and then re-present objects to people as the authority. The way that we've been practicing for a very long time, as you say, is quite different. I'm hoping that the two modes of operation are aligning.*

And it's interesting for us working with institutions because there are only two of us. Because of the way we work and our relationship, we can make decisions quite quickly. And we are very intuitive. Our approach is not necessarily overly "curatorial". It's around, "How can we tell a story with this?" So that's how we've always approached it. But it's really great for us working with institutions because we learn a lot from them: how their decision-making processes are structured and all the logistics around exhibition-making.

6.3 Wonder, curiosity, and the cabinet

6.3.1 Moments of discovery, captioning, and juxtaposition

A central theme of the research for this project has been to approach the strange and the wondrous in folklore through an artistic framework, but in entering the institution of the museum, it is possible to involve a further step, and that is to experience curiosity. Curiosity is an important reflective state for inquisitive thinking and a desire to understand something, and in museums there is a second connotation in that their collections can be full of curiosities – strange and unusual things. Curiosity carries us towards an exploration and search for knowledge, aiming to bridge the gap between what is known and unknown and is an important driving element of the

creative, artistic process. The experience of wonder, on the other hand, which precedes and drives curiosity, is more reflective and emotional, involving a sense of awe and reverence that can make the familiar seem strange or the limits of understanding apparent. It involves the confrontation of mystery and strangeness that is held by things beyond our knowledge. It defamiliarises and invites a deeper, often existential or aesthetic engagement with the world.

In the particular estrangement of the museum, Sloterdijk proposes, there is a process of knowing that revolves around the familiar and the different, "historically (temporally), spatially, socially and factually".[273] The institution offers the service of regulating the distance between audience and artefact, in this framing of graduated unfamiliarity. The institution acts as a facilitator, balancing closeness and otherness in the encounter, and providing small elements of narrative from which to construct knowledge.

Wonder can inspire curiosity by opening up new spaces of meaning, but it also includes a contemplative pause that is less about acquiring facts and more about being open to the extraordinary and to mystery. In this pause, wonder is both a precursor and a distinctive companion to curiosity, a prompt that is necessary to the search for artistic knowing. The specific kind of curiosity that is produced in the museum is what Thomas proposes as the method of knowing in a museum setting, and it comes down to (from the point of view of the institution) "moments of discovery, captioning and juxtaposition",[274] all elements of a method equally important for beginning artistic work in the museum.

6.3.2 The *Wunderkammer* principle

This inquisitive, curious urge to discover was present in the early traces of European museums. Beginning in the sixteenth century, wealthy private collectors acting through curiosity and the desire to collect, arranged objects from history and the natural world into cabinets of curiosity, or *Wunderkammern*. Following the principle of the *Wunderkammer* involves an eclectic sense of personal free association "bound up with memory and sense and imagination".[275] The desire to accumulate natural anomalies, hybrid animal forms, fakes, and rare objects as a form of intellectual entertainment, that could bestow a certain social status, was an important element of the appeal the *Wunderkammer* held for a particular level of society. In our current data-centre-supported digital era, which is driven by an impulse to exhaustively collect and algorithmically map,

the *Wunderkammer* also represents a kind of paradox. From our twenty-first-century perspective, this pseudo-scientific approach, alongside Bacon's thought that there was a chance of constructing a completeness of knowledge from elements of wonder, seems problematic and possessive, and yet there is still an appeal in the *Wunderkammer* principle as a highly subjective, artistic method.

Although the fashion for *Wunderkammern* was a precursor to the development of the historical museum as we understand it today, what made it distinct was a much freer attitude to categorisation and reasoning, a combination of rationality and irrationality that tied together nature and art. As a strategy it corresponds to an artistic or curatorial mode that is bound up with taste and speculation and revels in breaking rules and the spectacle of display. The Enlightenment development of the historical museum in the eighteenth century meant that the Wunderkammer was surpassed, however traces of the *Wunderkammer* principle remain in contemporary practice, and could be seen clearly through to the twentieth century in Dadaist and surrealist practices.[276]

This revival of the *Wunderkammer* as an active artistic strategy is central to the practice of Mark Dion, who regularly uses the curiosity cabinet to critique institutional taxonomy. This goes back to his work *Cabinet of Curiosities*, at the Wexner Center for the Arts in 1996, which confronted the rigidity of the way that the institution organises and classifies its knowledge.[277] Dion sees the curiosity cabinet as style of display that accentuates imagination and he was drawn to work with them as a form that "most closely resembles the surrealistic quality of the back room of many museums, rather than the exhibition galleries".[278] This realisation that the unseen spaces of the museum might be more interesting and wild than the public galleries is a recurring theme in artists' collaborations with museums as artists attempt to conceptually rearrange and re-present what the museum holds and what the museum could be.

6.4 Intervening, artistically

6.4.1 Setting up the stage

The use of the term "intervention" to describe an artist's project in a museum is a widely used expression that essentially describes a project where an artist both works and exhibits in a museum context. It seems to have some connotations of confrontation, or

possibly of emergency, and in some circumstances you might even substitute "interfere" to describe a more radical gesture of disruption in an institution. Essentially, though, the position assumes artistic, relational space between the institution and the audience.

Occupying this space, through an intervention project, places the artist at one unique point of a three-way relationship. While the institution facilitates the project and grants privileged access to the museum, there is, at the same time, a need to maintain a critical distance, with a foot on both sides of the institutional framework. This duality positions the artist as a kind of double agent, entrusted with permission to investigate the areas that lie beyond what the public normally get to see, while acting on behalf of the viewing audience in relation to this special permission. In this role, the artist is an expert viewer who is sent into the backstage areas of the museum to uncover and respond to what is there. Their access to these wilder, rarer, and unseen aspects of the collection that are not otherwise accessible to the public brings both responsibilities and privileges. From this perspective, the artist's work functions as reportage back to the audience, having the opportunity to formulate a response that operates in the realm of the wonder, curiosity, and imagination of the museum. The role of "artist-as-outsider" allows the creative view of an outsider and a perspective that operates with the critical subjectivity of the individual artist, as a catalyst in the system. From an audience's point of view there is also the chance for a vicarious pleasure in how an artist has attempted to break the conventions of the museum or gained access to usually hidden collections.

The staging of an artist's response to the museum itself and its collections is by now an established strategy of activation, a method of renewal and re-focusing on what a collection holds.[279] Often this engagement with a collection includes an implied critique of the museum and very often the critique highlights blind spots, biases, and injustices at the heart of the institution, including the understanding that in Europe many historic collections came to be through colonial ideologies. As museums come to reckon with these kinds of legacies, inviting critique and an outsider point of view shows a willingness to engage with the problematic qualities of the collection itself. But as Isabelle Graw suggests, it can also function as an absurd strategic outsourcing of institutional responsibility.[280] By inviting an outsider to voice contradictions that the museum is uncomfortable officially addressing itself, the institution

maintains its status while the artist carries the responsibility of navigating the controversy.

6.4.2 Finding my own strange wonder in the museum

In my own experience of working on this doctoral research, however, this critique has not been the initial motivating impulse to work with museum collections; rather, it has begun with a sense of the experience of the collection itself. The aim is to allow myself – as an outsider and a stranger – an engagement with the collection (also a stranger) to see what kinds of artistic processes might unfold and to allow myself permission to freely associate. As a newcomer to the institution, I try to bring my own points of view, feeling my way through according to my artistic values. I try to place significance on a practice that foregrounds my own strands of artistic curiosity, speculation, and wonder as a method, and sometimes this allows for the breaking of established and natural principles in the museum. It has only been on reflection of what has been achieved through these museum projects that the kind of critique I have been engaged in has come more into focus. I realised that the projects platform folklore as a special and wonderous phenomenon, and they bring objects of folklore from the museum into the light again. The critical function is to re-look at forgotten collections within a different kind of framework, to re-think the ways in which museums are able to animate these objects, and to connect them to the contemporary present in ways both imagined and tangible.

Matthew: *You mean that a museum's job is not to go beyond the presentation of the objects and what they are?*

Kirsten Bernhardt: *No, but not in the way like you would do it or with that approach. I think you asked why material is not important for us and I thought, "It's not like that." I just think we have different perspectives on these objects. Two people standing in front of a thing see different things because they have different knowledge, stories, and experiences. I think that was why I remembered this moment at the storage room when you said something, and I thought, "Yes, that's an approach I won't have. It's really interesting, but that's not…"*

Matthew: *You mean about the colours, for example?*

Kirsten: *The colours and the material.*

Matthew: *The transparent material?*

Kirsten: *Yes. I have other questions in mind when I look for objects, or when I go to the storage room and have a look around. It's not that it's not important, but there are other categories we choose objects by.*

6.4.3 The mediation of the institution

Any project that formally involves an artist engaging with a museum involves a conversation that takes place in this relational space between an artistic and an institutional position. The project requires the mediation of the museum on the level of access, engagement, technical, and practical means and so the critical success of the project depends on the willingness of both artist and institution to openly engage. For the artist, this involves a self-reflexive understanding of the kinds of processes that are being undertaken and to formulate questions that move the conversation. For the museum, it is important to show a willingness and openness to engage in practices that might sometimes run in a direction that is counterintuitive to established procedures.

The exhibition designer and artist Calum Storrie describes how, when he was working as an exhibition designer on an installation at the British Museum with the artist Gregor Schneider, he realised that an artist can "get away" with much more than what would normally be permitted in the museum. This involved the re-creation of part of the artist's house, which included a small door that necessitated the audience crouch to enter:

> While making this work at a practical level, I realised that this trick of disorientation and "making strange" was exactly what I often wanted to achieve in the mise-en-scène of exhibitions. However, I realised that I would never get away with this.[281]

It seems that part of what an artist can do in a museum is to test out what is possible, in exhibitions.

Institutional mediation helps to produce the meaning of the artistic gesture and how it is framed in a wider sense both inside and outside the framework of the museum. In the process of artistically engaging with the museum's collection, Kwon describes a relationship where the institution transfers their responsibility for interpretation and knowledge production to the artist as the progenitor of meaning.[282] But while the focus of a newly produced work is on the artist as a temporary interlocutor, this relationship undoubtedly works both ways. The institutional framework also transfers meaning to the artist's work.

It is therefore important to consider how the artist is introduced and how the project is framed in a critical context that places both the artist and institution in relation to each other. Questions such as "Why is the artist there?" or "How did the relationship unfold?" give context to how the resulting works have been produced and their site of critical interaction. In many projects, the answer can unfold through the works themselves, as an embedded result of the process of reflecting and responding to the collection. Ultimately, the artist's responsibility is generative, empowered with permission to contribute new forms of artistic knowing and, because of this, they can create artworks in ways that museums are not set up to do. Museum collections in this sense are a form of productive technology,[283] that artists-as-outsiders are best positioned to engage in.

As gatekeepers of collections, museums may allow artists in their role as outsiders to actually touch or rearrange objects from their collection. It can often be clearly apparent in artist's installations that they have handled artefacts from the collections themselves, and this provides a kind of vicarious touching for the audience to experience the work. Touch of course is a major sensory component of the carnivalesque and Walklate proposes that the antihierarchical power of the carnival is a sensibility that has real agency in the museum, where it is able to emphasise the museum's estrangement from the everyday.[284] By embracing the artistic carnivalesque, it can be possible for an institution to shift towards the potential to be a living, instinctive, and participatory space rather than a static cultural repository.

Matthew: *So, about this idea of the truth of an artefact. I remember how important it was to get the right date and correct name*

for the things that we were showing. This is also important for artists, but I think maybe for museums, even more important. Is it something to do with reputation maybe?

Kirsten Bernhardt: *That's our job, really. You have something, you can look around and say, "What is this?" It's our job to find out and to keep this knowledge about these things. I think in the folklore collection, you will find things that look like nothing. If you know what it is, there's a story behind it. If you lose this knowledge, then the object isn't worth anything anymore.*

I think for museums, this duty to conserve, to keep these objects, that's really important for us. I think visitors and other people often don't understand. They say, "We would like to touch that", or, "Why can't we touch that?" That's the main thing, we have to protect these objects. The moment they enter the storage room, we have to protect them from changing further. Nowadays, of course, we want to keep the traces of the object's history. It's not like we give it to the conservator to make it new.

But for us today, and for our conservators, it's clear, we don't put these traces away, that's an important rule. We just do everything to protect the object from being destroyed by, I don't know, things that damage it. But if there's a scratch, then there's a scratch.

As a host to the artist and of the artist's works, it is the institution's steps in presenting the work that guide an audience through an exhibition. What they reveal and what they omit give strong clues as to the institution's values, their critical function as curators, selectors, hosts, protectors, invigilators, and producers of the works. Despite the agency that the artist holds over their own work, the institution's framework cannot be ignored or avoided, even though it can have the effect of re-processing and re-orienting these standards and responsibilities for present and future understanding of the institution. Museums are defined by these connections to their audiences, and so for the artist, the institution brings a new audience for their work, but they too are bringing a new audience to the museum.

6.4.4 Raiding the icebox and mining the museum

Two early pivotal examples of artist interventions in historical museums are Andy Warhol's curatorial intervention *Raid the Icebox* (1970) and Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum: 'Metalwork, 1793–1880'* (1992). Warhol's intervention took place at the Rhode Island School of Design's museum (23 April–30 June 1970), where he purposely selected storage items, boxes, and display paraphernalia to present amongst museum objects and in so doing questioned established historical hierarchies of display and presentation.[285] Warhol was engaging with the imagined ideas of what Thomas has described as "the collections store as a sort of artefactual mausoleum, a dark space in which things languish unregarded".[286]

Two decades later, Fred Wilson's intervention at the Maryland Historical Society produced an exhibition that brought together, in sharp critical focus, nineteenth-century furniture and decorative pieces with relics of slavery and Native American artefacts. The exhibition had a far-reaching influence in developing more critical and enlightened practices in American history museums and for understanding the value that a new artistic point of view can bring to questioning an institution's point of view, decisions, and practices.[287] In so doing, Khadija Carroll La notes that an artistic intervention in the museum transforms the articles of a museum collection from "object to project", which in turn has the effect of altering the point of view from past to future looking,[288] a point of difference between a contemporary and a historical, museological perspective.

More recently, the trend for museums to create visible storage in the museum has become a way for them to open up what is still largely an internal view, but to present the collection "as a realm of life and imagination".[289] My strategy in *Wildness Makes This World* was to repurpose recently obsolete storage frames from the municipal collection of Seinäjoki. Just before the exhibition opened, the Kunsthalle moved into a new, purpose-built venue, making it possible to salvage their old storage architecture. These frames, handmade from wood and chicken wire, were used to construct the installation. This choice bypassed the pristine aesthetics of the new gallery, introducing a behind-the-scenes, hand-crafted archival atmosphere. The wire structures also functioned as open cages, evoking the dynamics of freedom and release that underpinned the exhibition's central theme of wildness.

6.4.5 Artists' fictional practices in the museum

In my first semester working on this doctoral project, during a class that I was hosting, we visited the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki. This was a memorable session for me so early in my project. The first half of the session was a chance for everyone to look around the museum with a focus on objects that might relate to their own practice, and the second half was a chance to discuss and reflect. I had asked my colleagues how an alternative (artistic) museum might be represented according to their own artistic practice. There were interesting answers and discussion, such as piling all the objects in the doorway, re-arranging and re-classifying everything in order of its smell, performance gestures in the galleries, and instigating absurdist access policies. These kinds of immediate impressions pointed out a certain kind of artistic urge for revolutionary disorder and chaos or chance in museum spaces that have such ordered environments. They represent an unravelling of the process that the modern museum was formed from; that is, moving out of chaos towards order. There was an unspoken understanding that artistic transgression towards these institutional systems were the point at which everyone would begin to impart their vision for a new museological order. These urges to "break" the museum further reveal the feeling that there were alternatives to the orthodox structures of an institution that serves a narrative of national history and a kind of radical speculative imagining of what else could take its place.

In *Curious Lessons in the Museum: The Pedagogic Potential of Artists' Interventions,* Claire Robbins traces the lineages of artists practices in museums, including various thematic manifestations of artists as tricksters, artists as clowns, or even artists as shamen.[290] This particular "as" is important because it shows that artists can inhabit these roles in a way that would be impossible for other staff at a historical museum. Robbins further highlights the role of humour in artistic practices, showing how something that is not emphasised within the practice of being a museum professional can be a powerful tool in challenging and reconfiguring museological power, systems, and categorisation.[291]

Two notable active interventions in the space of museums are Mark Wallinger's performance video *Sleeper* (2004), in which he roamed the floor of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin overnight in a clumsy bear costume,[292] and Francis Alÿs's video piece *Nightwatch* (2004),[293] in which a fox, captured by surveillance video cameras, roams through the National Portrait Gallery in London. These works

are funny in the peculiar sense of the word: they bring a strong presence of a strange (and wild) other into the museum, evoking a wildness derived from animals and the sense that there are multiple other worlds and priorities than those that the museum chooses to present to the public during opening hours. By introducing elements of humour and alterity, these artistic interventions cause museums to go beyond their traditional roles as custodians of knowledge and instead become sites of active dialogue and experimentation. They bring the engagement with the museum itself into the present. These strategies also disrupt the familiar rhythms and structures of the museum, inserting unexpected moments of wildness and otherness that can destabilise conventional interpretations of the past and present. Artists can open museum spaces to multiple perspectives and modes of engagement, and in so doing, they invite critical reflection on the dynamics that underly the museum, its narratives, and how public memory is constructed.

Grayson Perry's major exhibition at the British Museum, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (2011–2012) **(Img. 92)**, was a classic artistic and curatorial intervention in the vast collections of the British Museum in London. Historic objects were selected and presented as if they were artworks, alongside works from the artist. These curated selections from the museum were mainly small things, such as pilgrims' tokens, figures of deities, portable shrines, and crosscultural representations that reflected his interest in craft. The exhibition presented these objects from the collection on plinths and in vitrines, in the same way that Perry's works were presented, taking them out of their historic context and inviting the audience to look at them in an artistic way, something the museum would not normally be able to do.



90| Production still from Mark Wallinger, *Sleeper*, 2004, digital video, 150 min., recorded at Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin.



91 | Video still from Francis Alÿs, *The Nightwatch*, 2004, digital video, 16 min. 15 sec.

I saw Perry's show four years before I began this doctoral research and the exhibition had a long-lasting effect on me, lodging itself in my artistic consciousness. This was not only because many of the artefacts selected for the exhibition overlapped with what I thought I might choose from the collection myself, but because Perry contextualised the exhibition by reversing the usual order of the relationship of artistic intervention. As he explained:

> When I began working with the British Museum, I thought: why not reverse this process of response? […] Why not, I thought, make the works I am inspired to create, and find objects in this cast collection that respond to them?[294]

This conceptual inversion feels a bit like the joke that is often shared amongst artist friends, of making an open call to allow institutions to make a residency the artist's own studio, or inviting an institution to apply to the artist to be able to present them with a stipend. Perhaps Perry came to this conceptual inversion because of his childhood disappointment in the British Museum. In his catalogue essay he explained that what he saw in the museum as a child did not live up to his own collection of toys, further observing that "this feeling of supposedly wondrous things often not living up to my imagination has dogged me all my life".[295] What he leaves unsaid, but what is clearly a function of the exhibition as a whole, is to re-balance that childhood disappointment by injecting

a sense of artistic wonder into the British Museum through his exhibition. The exhibition's narrative is of his own personal cosmology, centring the story on his childhood teddy bear and the parallel journeys that both had undertaken up to that point in time. The teddy bear figure for Perry was a talisman and a figure onto which his childhood and adult fantasies could be projected. But as an artefact, Alan Measles, the teddy bear, did not look in good shape and fitted in well in the exhibition's collection of fragile and historic textile artefacts.



92| Exhibition view of Grayson Perry, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* at the British Museum, London, in 2011.

In a previous project, working in the museum collection of the Museum of Lincolnshire Life in 2006, Perry explained that he realised that taking note of the emotions that he has – particularly if they are difficult – when observing the collections in a museum, is an artistic skill:

> These rich feelings can coerce us into having a more memorable life-affirming experience just as much as positive experiences of joy, wonder, excitement or love. A big part of my job as an artist is to notice when I am having these feelings and then hopefully share them with you.[296]

These positions reflect a self-awareness of the artist's position in the relationship between the museum and the viewing audience. Perry clearly notices that his status as artist has the possibility to communicate vicariously with others who come to see the museum through his visions and the works that he produces. In drawing from this childhood experience and material disappointment, Perry frames this memory as an insightful artistic impulse, treating wonder as a disruptive and productive force. There are complex human emotions involved in our encounters with the museum as an institution, and reflecting on these is a skill for artists to recognise and build upon. Perry's transformation of that initial disappointment into new artworks feels like a real and instinctive need to artistically and psychologically rebalance a memory.

6.4.6 Three models of artistic intervention in the museum

As artistic interventions have become a standard form of artistic practice in museums and the value of an "artistic mode" within the historical museum is increasingly recognised, I can recognise three distinct models of engagement that have evolved, and these are outlined below.

1| The Artist as Curatorial Disruptor

The most characteristically recognisable form of artistic intervention takes place in the museum with an artist (or artist group), who has entered the collection as an outsider, presenting an exhibition project that re-curates the collection in some way, disrupting the usual order of presentation of the museum. These kinds of projects sometimes but not always include new works by the artist. The artistic gesture encompasses a wide range of modes, but the curatorial is central to the intervention, as the collection is re-constituted in new ways and forms, often critiquing the institution through political and aesthetic questions.

2| Institutional Entanglement

As awareness of the frameworks for recalibrating museum practice to respond to political challenges such as decolonial practice and the changing nature of society has grown, museums themselves have become much more engaged as agents of change within their own institutions. This in turn has meant that the kinds of relationships that are possible between the institution and the artist have also evolved. In a recent discussion of the work of Galas Porras-Kim, an artist who works extensively with historical museum collections, art critic Simon Wu describes these new configurations of artistic practice in the museum as having moved on from institutional critique to something he calls "institutional entanglement".[297] In this model, an artist functions as an "insider-outsider" who collaborates with the museum curators, conservators, and other expert staff to re-align museum practices. Wu recognises the changing relationship of the artist to the museum, asking:

> What would it mean if the institution, and the people within it, were not monolithically antagonized, but recognized as actors with whom to rewrite its interiors? Or if the moral position of the artist were greyer: less an oppositional figure 'outside' of the institution but, rather, one tasked with being a consultant or trickster within it?[298]

Across this project's four exhibitions, the entangled practices of producing an exhibition in cooperation with four very different museums necessarily meant that there needed to be a great deal of support from individual museum staff. I needed to rely on each institution's staff for access, technical help, and production, and ultimately the exhibitions could not have functioned without that

support. This cooperation between museum and artist reflects a time when we are moving past institutional critique towards a recognition that museums are made up of staff that are deeply aware of their collections, with all the institutional responsibility that these hold, and that they are willing to work with artists and other experts in reframing them.

3| Community Research and Mediation

ICOM's new definition of a museum shifts the emphasis from a focus on study towards active knowledge sharing.[299] This shift is reflected in the move to a much more inclusive and community-minded approach from museums in addressing their collections. Within this framework, an artistic intervention is no longer viewed as a gesture of disruptive, artistic critique by an outsider, but is one of many ways to engage in a meaningful exchange with a collection. The Museum of European Cultures in Berlin, for example, has updated its "Collection Concept" to clearly focus on a diverse participatory approach to cultural mediation.[300] In practice, this prioritises working alongside communities in exchanges that are often facilitated by artists, effectively turning audiences into co-creators. At its most direct, this ethos is embodied by community museums, which are founded and managed directly with or by local populations. I worked with a community museum, the Tavastila Local History Museum (Tavastilan kotiseutumuseo) in Mietoinen, Finland, on the production of my exhibition *para field notes*. These kinds of spaces navigate a dual role, operating internally as reflective sites for the local community while also engaging external audiences.

6.4.7 Awakening the present

Engaging with a broad range of audiences and source communities strengthens the museum as an institution overall, activating the potential of social and artistic connection to its collections. In a detailed study of the recent curatorial decisions made at the Museum of European Cultures in Berlin, Magdalena Buchczyk shows that collection development is the central strategy guiding how a museum planning for the future can "awaken the present". If institutions are able to shift collection policies towards "prefigurative collection development" as way of looking at the future of the collection and its social connections, there is a chance to move away from an inward-looking focus on structural issues and the "gaps in collections" to a more instrumental way of understanding

an institution's potential.[301] Institutions are then able to recognise social value and the direct relationships they hold with the communities they serve, reorienting towards a values-based idea of the past, present, and futures.

However, in a cultural sector where museums are competing for audience numbers within an "experience economy" of leisure, entertainment, and education, there is also a risk that visitors are presented with purely experience-based environments. While these attempt to cater to visitors by providing a consumable package, they can end up delivering only a lightweight spectacle or digital environments that obscure rather than highlight the questions that the collection holds. Art historian Penelope Curtis suggests that artist-led projects in heritage spaces offer a way out of this trap, operating no longer as simple interventions but as "parallel discourses" that illuminate collections in alternative ways. [302] Artists, can offer a more self-conscious and speculative engagement with the museum. In this environment, artworks may not necessarily offer answers, but they have the potential to reframe the museum experience through remediated engagement with collections. The modes of contemporary art that deal with alternative kinds of logics, spanning the sensory, imaginative, and cognitive, shift the discourse away from purely historical or factual engagement.[303] They can generate ideas about the future and allow for speculation on alternative ones.

Ultimately, what is clear is that practices of intervention, entanglement, and artistic community engagement by artists operate in a completely different mode to that of the museum. This is surely one reason why so many artists find jobs as museum educators, as they possess the overlapping skills of transforming the materials of the museum into engaging and productive sessions. Artists bring skills to projects in historical institutions that are able to animate the museum in ways that the institution itself could not achieve on its own.

6.5 The museum as an experiment

6.5.1 Prototypes and laboratories

This capacity of artists to animate static collections was put to a radical institutional test by curator Clementine Deliss during her tenure as director of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt. During her time as director of the ethnographic museum, Deliss ran an extensive programme of contemporary artists' engagement with the

museum's collection in the form of residencies and exhibitions. The resulting exhibitions were diverse, unpredictable, and open-ended, allowing Deliss to formulate a practical methodology for reimagining what a museum could become. Her approach directly challenges the notion that museum artefacts are dead or fixed historical objects while addressing the ethical complexities inherent to managing colonially charged ethnographic collections in Western Europe.

To overcome the problem of pastness and death in the museum, Deliss proposes thinking of the institution as a laboratory, an approach that is inherently future-looking.[304] This has echoes of El Lissitzky's early modernist experiments of the exhibition as laboratory but applies the idea to the institution itself. Her proposal is to think of artefacts and collections as a space where experimental practice can develop and the objects or artefacts themselves can be the *starting* point for critical engagement and redevelopment. From this perspective, each artefact can be outward facing for analysis; the site of the museum (or artistic) practice only begins with the artefact, and the potential for where the practice might diverge is open. This way of thinking takes us away from the idea of classifying objects as ethnographic or historical and closer to the thinking of art or design, where artefacts are transformed into *prototypes* for critical engagement.[305] It disrupts the narrative of objects ending their journeys in museums and helps to reframe a historical structure of viewing an artefact and opens up a contemporary one.

In my practice, I am drawn to the ephemeral accoutrements of folk performance rituals, including costumes and props, which often slip past museum collection and display due to their fragile or temporary nature. These are the kinds of collection and attention gaps where I find it possible to begin to engage as an artist. To attempt to begin to re-animate folklore objects from their resting place in museum storage means first considering what alternatives there are in dealing with the loss of the living context that objects in a museum hold. This can be achieved by borrowing specific objects from their context in the museum and temporarily bringing them into an artistic context in a gallery or specific artistic installation in the museum. Another possible technique is to deal in fiction as a method of grasping "reality and at the same time that which is veiled by reality", which was Marcel Broodthaers's notable artistic method of constructing a museum.[306] This can occur when an artwork that looks like it could be a museum object is inserted into a museum display, or, when museum objects that are brought

to an art gallery are placed alongside artworks, changing the possible ways to look at them in both contexts.

6.5.2 Questioning the framework of the museum

As my art practice has morphed into a more research-based process, the museum itself has increasingly become both the site and object of my artistic research. I can observe the institutional dynamics at play in the museum's curatorial decisions, the aesthetics of its display presentations, and how it unfolds the historical narratives that influence wider understandings of folk traditions. From this close perspective, the processes of historicisation, in the act of placing objects within a specific historical context, can seem to both illuminate and obscure the complexities of folklore. What this shift in perspective has offered me is a new kind of freedom to research and explore historical artefacts and objects relating to folklore that have already been mediated by the museum and historians.

Alongside the continuing practice of working with other experts and practitioners of folklore, the museum provides a public place of interpretation and research, an invitation to wonder, to be curious about and to engage with cultural objects. Museum artefacts offer a unique kind of legitimacy as research objects as they have already been selected, historicised, and mediated to hold a position in the museum collection. These processes, of course, can lead to many further questions about provenance, collection management, and what stories are told about objects in presenting them. What comes into artistic focus then is how these processes have taken place and what they reveal about folk traditions and the places that they have taken place in. I have realised that when undertaking artistic research, the aesthetics of presentation and historicisation of the museum have become the framework for an artistic exchange as much as the specific objects of folklore themselves.

6.6 Assembling the "artistic parts" in the museum

6.6.1 Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots

The Braunschweiges Landesmuseum is a large state historical museum, but in working there, my specific interest was in its folklore collection, which had not received much attention since the retirement of its curator twenty years earlier. In developing the exhibition, and working with the curatorial staff, I selected specific domestic artefacts and concentrated on costumes, clothes, and

figures, including homemade measures, the *Hochzeitsbitter*'s hat, and a bridal crown. The museum staff working on the show were faithful to their responsibility to present exhibits that displayed an objective historical truth, making use of the professional tools and techniques that they had at hand in the museum. But my practice as an artist was attempting to access truth in a different way. I was bringing fictional and speculative practices into the museum, and it took this intervention and realisation that these were clearly divergent in a museum context for me to recognise them as something artistically important in my own practice.

A couple of weeks after the exhibition opened, I was having a conversation with a curator in the exhibition rooms. As we talked, I overheard the comments of a visitor to the show as they approached the room playing my video piece *The Footwashing*. The film depicts a ritual footwashing involving a young woman wearing a traditional Braunschweig folk costume and a man in a straw costume. The visitor was explaining to her partner that the film must have been from more than 100 years ago. This comment could be understandable given we were in a historical museum, although perhaps she had not understood that she was also in an art exhibition. The comment was significant to me because it displayed her first thought as she saw the young woman in traditional costume. She had either assumed that the film belonged to a historical period of at least 100 years ago or that it was a fictional version of this. This has made me begin



93| Production still for *para field notes* at Photographic Gallery Hippolyte in 2018, showing display figures in storage at the Tavastilo Local Museum in 2017.

to reflect on such costumes, and their place in popular imagination. I had inserted a fiction into the museum. Did it matter?

There was a further unforeseen complication in the list of works for the show, as it was noted that the captions for the works that were artworks had been composed by me, and the captions for the historical artefacts had been written by the museum. I had not realised at the time that the consequence of this was to draw attention to the two ways of understanding the exhibition and that it highlighted the conceptual divides between the historic objects and the artworks in the show.

94|
95| Production still from *The Footwashing*, 2016, 16 mm film converted to digital, colour, silent.

6.6.2 para field notes

In 2017, I worked with the Tavastila Local Museum in the village of Mietoinen, near Mynämäki in Finland for *para field notes*, which was shown at Photographic Gallery Hippolyte, in Helsinki the following year. As a community museum, the Tavastila Local Museum is entirely run by volunteers. Their collection contains donated artefacts from families and the small institutions of the local region, with the museum housed in an old schoolhouse that carries with it a kind of inherent pedagogical nature – one of the ideas at the heart of the idea of a museum. Working with this museum was a major element of my research for the *para field notes* exhibition. In a reverse of the previous exhibition context in a historical museum, this exhibition took place in a gallery space in Helsinki and objects from the museum were brought into the gallery context alongside the artworks.

In this exhibition there was also some uncertainty as to the truth of the material that was presented. There were questions about whether the material was actually based on true historical phenomena, something I found interesting, because it revealed that it is often not a given that we trust artist's presentations in terms of the historical (it might well be fiction). The mythological entities known as *para* were central to the exhibition, and I observed and documented through sculptures the *paras* at the church at Kalanti.

6.6.3 The Scream of the Strawbear

The exhibition *The Scream of the Strawbear* took place in 2019 across two sites: the art gallery Kunsthalle Gießen and the historical Oberhessisches Museum. There was crossover and exchange between both spaces with artworks in the museum and historical artefacts in the gallery. Many of the objects in the folklore collection





did not have full catalogue information available, and we had to research some of them to understand better what they were. What is important was that the museum artefacts took on their own artistic aesthetics and narrative when they were presented in the space of the contemporary art gallery. At the end of the show, Katharina Weick-Joch, the director of the museum, pointed out that there would be new entries on the museum objects' records noting they had been included in my exhibition and she wondered how this would change the use of these objects in the future.

Staff members from the Oberhessisches Museum were the first to perform for my video series, *The Sound of the Cultural Office*. In *The Scream of the Strawbear* exhibition, these video performances served at least two purposes. Firstly, they acted as a kind of interpretation of the entire exhibition, but used the language, or in this case the sound, of the folk performance (screaming) involved in the show, as it's only interpretive gesture. Secondly, I was instinctively wanting to work with the human aspects of the museum institution and the cultural authorities of the city, but in a way that reinterpreted their standing as cultural gatekeepers and managers. Although the screams of the participating staff members were not poetic in the sense of language, they did, in a sense, resemble the nonsense poetry performances of Dada. These performed screams – they were not actual screams – can be interpreted as nonsense as it is absurd that museum and cultural staff are screaming. But if so, is there an alternative reading of the exhibition? The underlying intention of making this work was to disrupt interpretation, to break the usual framework of the museum's framing mechanisms and contextual language in order to reclaim some of the poetic mystery of the screams of the Wildman.

6.6.4 Wildness Makes This World

The simple question at the heart of my exhibition *Wildness Makes This World:* "What is wildness to you?" was also asked of the Seinäjoki Museum itself. This question was a new one for the museum curators and we had several phone meetings (it was during the time of the pandemic) to develop our understanding of how to respond in a museum context. In the end, objects related to "wild" situations as they were understood by curators Eeva Korvola and Henni Mäntylä were presented in the exhibition, from a range of different collections including objects relating to firefighting, animals, and various protective objects.

The collection management team at the Seinäjoki Museum were able to negotiate with the Kunsthalle to allow a non-traditional, barrier-free way of presenting artefacts, giving me a great deal of freedom to show the museum artefacts amongst other artworks and objects loaned by some of the participants in the exhibition. This mixed method of presenting the museum objects felt like a small revolution in terms of presenting them, as they were laid out on presentation racks that had been constructed from re-purposed storage racks from the city's art collection, without glass or other security features. They were all obviously curious and interesting pieces, but the exhibition was able to show them amongst other personal objects and artworks and so the institutional hierarchies of museum mediation were removed from the presentation. This resulted in it being initially unclear whether these objects belonged to a participant in the show, to the museum collection, or whether they were an original artwork. Details of the objects were only available if you sought them on the show's room sheet.

6.6.5 When museum artefacts become bi-textual

The discursive element of the exhibition-making process between artist and museum, artwork and historic object, generates various contrasts. When they are included in an artistic presentation, the museum elements of the projects operate in a dually coded role, allowing their status as collected and historic to be loaned to the artistic presentation in which they sit, renewing their status in an artistic sense and obligating an audience to look at them in a different way. A degree of authenticity comes from their status as museum objects that have been processed and sanctioned by the institution. This status has its origin in the meaning anointed to their past use and origin, whereas the artworks are newly produced in comparison. Temporarily repurposing them as artworks transfigures them into something other than what they were before making use of the relational and contextual surroundings in their presentation as art.[307] In this art context, we experience them with a newness that directs their meaning somewhere else, inviting free association and speculation on their use in historical as well as fictional ways.

On the other hand, when artworks are placed in the museum, there is a similar discursivity, but it is in the reverse context, as the artworks are objects that were created as artworks. Thomas articulates this process as the structural superimposition of texts (including the visual) of the old into the new – and the new into

the old. He points out that this bi-textuality is a key mode of operation of an artist's intervention strategy.[308] In my experience, these exchanges have shone light on the institutional practices of both kinds of spaces and they have also pushed me to reconsider the modes of presentation I am working with as an artist.

96| Exhibition view of *The Scream of the Strawbear* at the Oberhessisches Museum in 2019, showing the artworks (in the vitrine, centre amongst other museum artefacts) Tobacco Resuscitation Bellows, eighteenth century, from the Wellcome Collection, London; framed pigment print and Tobacco Resuscitation Kit, 2019; bee smoker, plastic pipe, and funnels.



97| Exhibition view of *The Scream of the Strawbear* in the Oberhessisches Museum Tower in 2019, showing *The Sound of the Cultural Office, Giessen*, 2019, digital video, 9 min. 47 sec.



A set of observations on the transpositions that occur in the experience of working across both the Historical Museum and the Art Gallery:

Transposition	Artworks in a Historical Museum Context
1. The Context as Commentary	The artworks have a chance to act as a commentary on the museum objects they are placed alongside. They offer a disruption that provides the chance for an alternative reading of a historical theme, or even one that has a chance to develop non-linear arguments within the museum scenography.[309] Artworks might be a challenge to the standard kinds of questions that are asked in a museum as they bring a discursive sense of occupying both truths and fictions in the field. The artistic production of doubt comes into play.
2. Chronology	The convention of titling an artwork with its production date ensures that a newly created artwork placed in a museum stands out alongside the chronologies at play in a setting that is examining history. It immediately draws attention to historic objects and the value that a museum places on the presenting the age of its objects on display. Positioning a newly created artwork within a historic collection illuminates the strict chronological frameworks that museums rely on to categorise and validate their objects.
3. Truth & Technique	Museums have professional and specific handling and presentation techniques for their historic objects and value is placed on the correct titling and dating. Care is taken that the best practice in the care of historic objects is observed and sometimes outside consultant experts will be brought in to provide extra context and skill for specific presentations. I have sometimes learned better handling practices and ways to care for my own works from these experts.
4. Institutional Systems	Systems of acquisition, categorisation, curation, exhibition, and education are ongoing in a museum. In projects such as *The Scream of the Strawbear* and *Walk on Roses and Forget-me-nots*, my artworks were only in the museum as a temporary intervention and in most cases were removed after the exhibition projects were completed. As they were loaned for these temporary presentations, they stood outside of most of these processes despite their exhibition presence. Later, some works have been acquired by the museums for their collections, at which point they have been formally accessioned.

Museum Objects in an Art Gallery Context

In the art gallery setting the museum objects are neither in an in situ or in context display. They rely on the context of the other artworks in the exhibition for their interpretation, which in my case was trying to re-enchant them, making use of historical knowledges and folk traditions and also the context and framing of contemporary art. As in the museum, doubt as to the actual origin of artefacts is a factor in their interpretation.

The art gallery only temporarily provides the space for exhibition; it has a much more process-orientated system where exhibitions are only viewable for a short period before new ones are assembled. Viewers encounter the overall show as a new presentation, and this has the effect of bringing the museum objects into the present tense. In my presentations, through titles and descriptions on a room sheet, it still remains possible to discover that these museum objects belong to a historic museum collection. Knowing this contextual history of the museum objects allows a certain amount of the institutional influence of the museum to be present in them, whilst at the same time taking on new responsibilities in an artistic context.

The element of the presentation of the museum's prescribed historical truth is also withdrawn as the objects are removed from the contextualising presence of the museum and new artistic conditions of the gallery come into play. In an art context, these objects are no longer performing the museum's history, but are leaning to another narrative, one where aesthetic values, speculation, and fictional possibility are all other ways of viewing the pieces on display. Artefacts that were previously behind glass can be viewed (and smelled) in fresh ways.

While I borrow items from the museum's collection, the processes of acquisition, categorisation, curation, and education are all appropriated by me for the short duration of my exhibition. In *para field notes*, there were several school teaching posters and other pedagogical aids that became untrustworthy as historic objects during the time that they were exhibited. I found that inserting these objects into the artistic presentation questioned them by opening them up to differing points of view. They were no longer simply historic teaching objects, but they were also visual art objects with a differing set of criteria for viewing them.

6.7 The reflexive stranger

6.7.1 Embracing the archive gaps

In reflecting on the practice of working with museums that has taken place throughout this project, it often feels that the processes and the institutional framework of the historical museum work in opposition to my art practice. To begin with, I thought that in the museum context I might find a legitimate other or path that might lend a further element of authenticity to my work; however, this has only partially transpired, as I found that while historic museum collections hold rich, varied, and fascinating materials with which to engage, they are also deeply inauthentic spaces, full of gaps, silences, divergent ideologies, and frustrations.

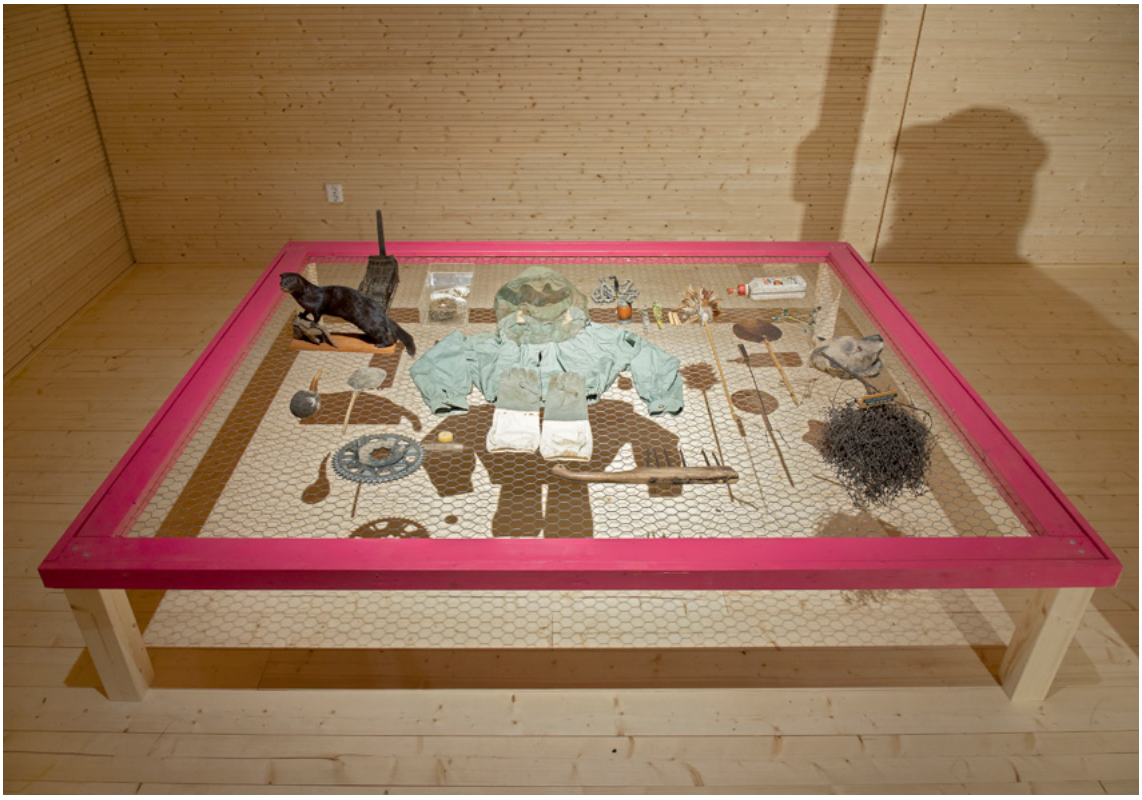
Embracing these archival gaps allows curiosity to become an active methodology. As Thomas argues, "the museum is only a method, the collection only genuinely a creative technology, if it is sustained and enlivened by enquiry, by exploration of its history and by experimentation with its possibilities in the present".[310] Similarly, the process of entering the museum and engaging in the wonder and the curiosity of the collections I have encountered, as an artist-as-outsider, has involved unending rounds of questions and discussion. Working against the museum's structural frameworks, which can sometimes feel like collections are a fixed repository of historical truth, I came to see my role as an artist as one of probing and experimenting, making use of the gaps and curiosities as generative and productive strengths in the process of making use of the museum as a form of technology for making new things.[311]

This process is not without difficulty or responsibility, however. Like Grayson Perry, museologist and artist Martha Fleming also reminds us that the key to working with cultural institutions is maintaining self-awareness, which she suggests, is both the burden and the gift of the artist within the institution:

> This is a simple, and yet fiendishly difficult, self-reflexive activity that is the essence of what makes art a philosophical investigation. This self-reflexivity is the best thing we have acquired as artists, and it is the most important thing we bring with us […] as strangers.[312]

To work within the museum as an artist, then, is to occupy this dual position of belonging and estrangement, making use of its resources and histories, while at the same time questioning and

98| Exhibition view of *Wildness Makes This World* at Kunsthalle Seinäjoki in 2020, showing: reclaimed art collection storage rack, from the City of Seinäjoki Art Collection, previously held at the old Kunsthalle Seinäjoki, Upankatu 3; rat trap, beekeeper's smock, gloves and beesmoker, flyswatters, feather dusters, taphina betulina fungus and branch, bear mask, bird's nest and eggs, bones, skulls, and trident from the Seinäjoki Museums; mink from Mervi; sprockets from Juha; blue canister from the Martikkala sand quarry; Duncan's sausage stick from the Isovuori hut; self-made drum sticks from Sanna; incense and candle from Sanna; motorcycle chain from Juha; gear oil canister from Juha (all items loaned by exhibition participants).



reframing them.

My work with folklore in the museum, and museum objects in the gallery, can be understood as an experiment in doublings, both questioning and acknowledging the material at hand, using institutional artefacts in ways that superimpose new ways of viewing them. This work in the context of museum collections is only the beginning of an attempt to build something in these spaces that might match a vision of understanding the presentation of folklore. It is through the combination and juxtaposition of these two approaches that an alternative reading of folklore can be achieved, something that can both question and acknowledge the institution and the artefact in the production of imagination.

248 Constance Classen, *The Museum of the Senses: Experiencing Art and Collections* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 1.
249 Classen, *Museum of the Senses*, 2.
250 Peter Sloterdijk, "Museum—School of Alienation", trans. Iain Boyd Whyte, *Art in Translation* 6, no. 4 (2014): 441, https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2014.11425538.
251 Gottfried Korff et al., "Reflections on the Museum", *Journal of Folklore Research* 36, no. 2/3 (1999): 269.
252 Khadija Carroll La, "Object to Project: Artists' Interventions in Museum Collections", in *Sculpture and the Museum*, ed. Christopher R. Marshall (Routledge, 2017), 222, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315088259.
253 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (Routledge, 2002), 6.
254 Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 15.
255 Classen, *Museum of the Senses*, 9.
256 Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 39.
257 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (Penguin Books, 2003), 135.
258 There are also many other more recent cultural references for this coming to life of artefacts, such as the series of *Night at the Museum* movies, where objects in museum displays come alive after the museum closes and groups of children stay the night at the museum afterhours.
259 Groys, "Age of Biopolitics", 54.
260 Sloterdijk, "Museum—School of Alienation", 446.
261 The "Castle Lion" is a medieval lion sculpture commissioned in the twelfth century by Henry the Lion; it is used as a symbol of the city of Braunschweig.
262 This theatricality is a natural point for artists to enter the museum, a ready-made stage for bending the fictions and the necessary make-believe involved in the presentation of history.
263 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (University of California Press, 1998), 3.
264 Tony Bennett, *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays* (Routledge, 2018), 9.
265 Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 7.
266 Jen Walklate, "Heterotopia or Carnival Site?", *Museum Worlds* 6, no. 1 (2018): 36, https://doi.org/10.3167/armw.2018.060104.
267 Katharina Weick-Joch, 'Win-Win. Matthew Cowan at the Oberhessisches Museum or: A Contemporary Artist Interacting with a Historical Collection', in *The Scream of the Strawbear*, ed. Matthew Cowan (Leipzig: eeclectic, 2023), 42, EPUB.
268 ICOM, "Museum Definition", International Council of Museums, accessed 20 December 2024, https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/.
269 Colin Sterling, "Museums after Progress", *Museums & Social Issues* 18, nos 1–2 (2024): 4, https://doi.org/10.1080/15596893.2024.2488153.
270 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 144.
271 Paula Findlen, "The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy", *Journal of the History of Collections* 1, no. 1 (1989): 60–62, https://doi.org/10.1093/jhc/1.1.59.
272 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 117.
273 Sloterdijk, "Museum—School of Alienation", 269.
274 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 101.
275 Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 12.
276 Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 11.
277 Mary Anne Staniszewski, "Mark Dion: Cabinet of Curiosities", *Artforum*, 1 May 1997, https://www.artforum.com/events/mark-dion-cabinet-of-curiosities-211474/.
278 Lisa Graziose Corrin et al., *Mark Dion* (Phaidon, 1997), 135.
279 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 113.
280 Isabelle Graw, "Field Work", *Flash Art* (November/December 1990): 137.
281 Calum Storrie, "After the Delirious Museum", in *Artists Work in Museums: Histories, Interventions, Subjectivities*, ed. Matilda Pye and Linda Sandino (Wunderkammer Press, 2013), 174.
282 Kwon, *One Place after Another*.
283 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 117.
284 Walklate, "Heterotopia or Carnival Site?", 39.
285 See Rhode Island School of Design Museum, "Raid the Icebox 1 with Andy Warhol", accessed 15 December 2024, https://risdmuseum.org/exhibitions-events/exhibitions/raid-icebox-1-andy-warhol.
286 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 67.

287 Cara Ober, “How Mining the Museum Changed the Art World”, *BmoreArt*, 3 May 2017, https://bmoreart.com/2017/05/how-mining-the-museum-changed-the-art-world.html.
288 La, “Object to Project”, 217.
289 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 67.
290 Robbins, *Curious Lessons*, 105.
291 Robbins, *Curious Lessons*, 106.
292 “Turner 2007 - Mark Wallinger - YouTube”, accessed 15 December 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LD05OVIRkNY&t=223s.
293 See https://francisalys.com/the-nightwatch/.
294 Grayson Perry and British Museum, eds., *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman: Grayson Perry*, exhibition catalogue (British Museum Press, 2011), 11.
295 Perry and British Museum, *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, 10.
296 Grayson Perry, *Grayson Perry: The Charms of Lincolnshire; 4 February - 7 May 2006* (Arts Council England; Lincolnshire County Council, 2006), 15.
297 Simon Wu, “Towards a New Museology”, *Frieze*, 28 January 2025, https://www.frieze.com/article/gala-porras-kim-simon-wu-249.
298 Wu, “Towards a New Museology”.
299 Lizette Gradén and Tom O’Dell, *Hip Heritage and Museum Practices in Contemporary Hybrid Markets* (Routledge, 2024), 18.
300 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, “Collection Concept for the Museum Europäischer Kulturen”, policy document, 2022, https://www.smb.museum/fileadmin/website/Museen_und_Sammlungen/Museum_Europaeischer_Kulturen/02_Sammeln_und_Forschen/MEK_Sammlungskonzept_EN.pdf.
301 Magdalena Buchczyk, “Transforming Legacies, Habits and Futures: Reshaping the Collection at the Museum of European Cultures”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 28, no. 5 (2022): 575, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2021.2025143.
302 Penelope Curtis, “New Wine in Old Bottles – Contemporary Art in Historical Settings”, *Apollo Magazine*, 22 February 2023, https://apollo-magazine.com/contemporary-historic-art-museums-galleries/.
303 Russell Staiff cited in Rebecca Farley and Venda Louise Pollock, “Contemporary Art in Heritage Practice: Mapping Its Intentions, Claims, and Complexities”, *Heritage & Society* 15, no. 3 (2022): 241–58, https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032X.2022.2126223.
304 Clémentine Deliss, “Manifesto for the Post-Ethnographic Museum”, in *The Metabolic Museum* (Hatje Cantz, 2020), 12.
305 Clémentine Deliss, *Object Atlas: Fieldwork in the Museum* (Kerber, 2012), 23.
306 Putnam, *Art and Artifact*, 21.
307 Levinson, *Contemplating Art*, 28.
308 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 97.
309 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 106–7.
310 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 141.
311 Thomas, *Return of Curiosity*, 117.
312 Martha Fleming, “The Science Lesson”, in *Artists Work in Museums: Histories, Interventions, Subjectivities*, ed. Matilda Pye and Linda Sandino (Wunderkammer Press, 2013), 165.

CONCLUSION

Part of the process of coming to the end of this research has been to organise the artistic documentation of the works that I have made. This documentation has been a layering process, as the exhibitions themselves are collections of many things, including new artworks, traditional rituals, community practices, and museum artefacts. These layers have made up exhibitions that provided viewers a chance to look at things in a specialised way, meaning that the particular, humorous, and instinctive energies of the folklore I have worked with has been transformed into an active speculative site, adding fictional elements to the layers of documentation. I have realised that by treating folklore as an already creative and expressive act, it has been possible to construct an encounter with the materials of folklore as particular and extra-ordinary, while remaining connected to their original contexts. In reflecting on these exhibition projects, I have oriented my artistic vocabulary towards the overlapping boundaries of contemporary art and folklore as a dialogue that values imagination and possibility as primary artistic responses to tradition.

As I draw all these threads together, I'm also looking back on my own time as a folk dancer and performer, taking part in traditions across Aotearoa New Zealand and Britain. What is it that I find in the essence of those original folk dances I learned with Green Man Morris in Auckland in the 1990s? What is it that I continue to look for in traditional folklore? As well as the close bonds and memories formed with friends and strangers, what is the nature of the moments that connect folk performers and audiences? Reflecting on these connections has been one cornerstone that I have relied on in my artistic practice.

The exhibitions, text, and conversations that make up this research are ways of formulating a response to these and many more questions. Therefore, by way of a conclusion, I am presenting these across five overarching theoretical themes. Embedded within these themes are key *Artistic Insights* as understandings that have emerged directly from studio production, research and exhibition production across the project. The exhibitions, text, and conversations that make up this research are ways of formulating a response to these and many more questions. Therefore, by way of a conclusion, I would like to highlight some of the realisations that have come to light as field notes in my own practice over the course of this research.

The eyes of the mask

The practice of masking and disguise that serve as central aesthetics in much of my work are forms that are situated in performance traditions, but which can also sometimes be read as a kind of self-portraiture. However, this is not self-portraiture in the traditional sense of showing myself, but in artworks that deal in *not* revealing myself. The three Wildman sculptures that audiences encountered as they entered Kunsthalle Gießen for *The Scream of the Strawbear* were examples of these. It has long been clear to me that I have been operating in a dual role of performer and documenter of folklore, a position that opens practical and aesthetic questions in balancing the performative aspects of folklore and presenting it through visual art modes. Although this disguise practice has long been part of my artistic work, I now realise this engagement with the potentially unsettling presentations of masked characters as a central point around which my artworks revolve.

Artistic Insight 1: The Wildman sculpture looks back at you

As I construct many of the masks and disguises in the studio, I enjoy the slightly comic act of trying them on. This practical side of making disguise and costumes from many different kinds of materials has always involved an active restriction of motion, resulting in clumsy and heavy movements; yet, eventually, they come to be presented as static forms in the gallery. In this form, the masks and costumes-as-sculptures can also flip the gaze. Viewers see the figurative sculptural pieces as artistic documents of folk performance, but also as symbols of themselves being observed as the figures can have the sense of appearing to watch an audience.

Artistic Insight 2: Gender dynamics and the liberty of disguise

In my practice, as well as accessing an element of self-portraiture through these costumes, there is also the reflection of how the traditions that I have engaged with play with gendered and transgressive performance. Morris dancing sides codify social identity through costume and the performance of dance rituals, and the Wildman figures I have worked with operate as community-focused, disruptive figures. These kinds of folk performances sanction certain extravagant actions, through dancing, screaming, singing, and processions, in otherwise normative settings and the costume is a fundamental emblem that grants permission for this transgression.

Even though these works deal directly with the transformations brought about by masks, disguises, and constructed costumes, they also reveal a kind of paradoxical truth; that is, that these elements of performative disguise are at the centre of folklore's perceived aura of authenticity and contribute to it as an active social force. Spectators and participants are drawn to these kinds of rituals precisely because they offer an alternative, grounded ritual space in contrast to the rapid acceleration of contemporary life. The masked folk strangers that are at the centre of my research, whether configured as wildmen, *Strawbears*, or anonymous visitors, relate to the symbolic masked archetypes around which collective rituals operate. This kind of mode of folklore, which draws communities together around a shared performance, does not necessarily require historical accuracy to generate communal value and genuine, living connection.

Across this project, it has been the idea that people perceive in folklore an authentic kind of communal force in spirit that has interested me the most, rather than whether this authenticity is deserved or not. It has always been something much more elusive and performed, produced as a shared feeling that arises in the act of collective participation and seasonal repetition. This is a quality that makes folklore an attractive territory for an artist. By allowing the authentic to remain fluid and partly hidden, the practice operates in a space where truth and imagination can overlap, shifting focus away from strict institutional definitions and back towards the living, instinctive language of the tradition itself.

As a reflective process, artistic research becomes productive in anchoring these observations by identifying what has happened in the local contexts that they took place in. While folklore is a universal phenomenon, connecting communities and occurring throughout our cultural calendars, my strategy is to look for ways to reveal its particularity and its unique peculiarity. These qualities are intertwined with local communities and landscapes that support folk traditions. In this project, their shift into the realm of art draws on the exhibition modes of historic museums and contemporary art, where there is a chance to create a context that highlights their unique functional and performative qualities. This framing brings out the aesthetics of folk authenticity that distinguishes folklore as unique.

Folklore as a fantasy mirror

In contemporary life, folklore retains a sense of being an "anti-world", a fantasy mirror containing both the past and the present (and future), that we cannot completely inhabit but which is constantly remade and reinterpreted. Working in exhibition contexts across both contemporary art and museum spaces has involved navigating between artistic and historical explanations of how we have come to this understanding of what folklore is today. Developing strategies and artistic methods for placing my practice between these kinds of institutional approaches has been central to the project. As well as learning about institutions, collections, and how staff members approach their work in museum settings, I have learned about my own values of imagination, speculation, and possibility as I produce new work and reflect on crossing over between institutional methodologies.

Artistic Insight 3: Bi-textuality and art/artefact relations

This process of moving things back-and-forth across institutional thresholds has reinforced my understanding of how objects' (artefacts and artworks) presentation affects their interpretation. Removing an artefact from its glass case and placing it in a gallery enables new aesthetic impressions to be had, and placing new artworks in a historical museum setting creates some doubt in the systems that we use to agree on shared histories. These exercises in exchange expose the layering of how we read an artwork or artefact. It is possible that they can be both at the same time, whilst also speculating on other imagined possibilities.

To understand how folklore exists now, it has been necessary to pay attention to how it has developed from the "folk revival" that began across Europe in the early twentieth century. The characteristics of this revival were marked by the continuation of nineteenth-century Romantic ideals, which became the basis for mythologising ideas of folklore across Europe. This sometimes led to the notion that folk customs were remnants and survivors of ancient pagan rites or of European antiquity, transferring cultural expression from rural and working-class to academic and urban spheres.

This shift in context is still relevant to the understanding of folklore today and has resulted in folklore as a discipline that has been studied and categorised. Folklore as a discipline recognises it as an ongoing cultural process that, while often nostalgically

yearning for a trace of ancient pagan or rural tradition, has simultaneously transformed into an ongoing, living practice adapted for contemporary meaning and cultural expression. Seasonal and calendar traditions become contemporary because they continue to be repeated in the present, making themselves relevant by their position in the calendar and the drawing together of communities. The "past-ness" of folk traditions can make them seem to simply be a source of past customs, but they are clearly a dynamic, evolving reflection of communal expression that builds on what has happened before. What has become clear to me is that in these creative expressions of folklore, imagination is a vital force in the ongoing production of folk events such as Wildman rituals, helping to continually ascribe new creative meanings to rituals and their place in people's lives, bringing the past into the present and the future.

Artistic Insight 4: Geographic dislocation and the antipodean topsy-turvy

In my upside-down perspective as a Pākehā New Zealander, I can see evidence of how learning English folk traditions in Auckland in the 1990s has influenced my outlook in this project. Marking the beginning of the spring in England by dancing on top of a volcano in Auckland each year on the 1 May is completely out of season but at the same time still holds a kind of topsy-turvy logic that can be found in other more carnivalesque elements of folklore. This project has led me to realise that this original geographic dislocation was a kind of unique perspective that drove me towards thinking about the structures and meaning of folk rituals in a unique way. I became focused on the elements of folk ritual that we use to anchor ourselves to specific times, places, and communities, even when the seasons are completely reversed. In leaving New Zealand, I went searching for a kind of "real" or "authentic" folklore in various European settings; each time, I learned more about community and ritual, and that these links between people, place, and action are how genuine meaning is produced amongst participants and observers.

Artistic citations and contextual toolboxes

Considering folklore in the field of art involves negotiation with practitioners and communities and making use of artistic citations and other contextual tools in building up the presentation of an exhibition. There are always going to be questions raised about artistic

interpretation of cultural materials; for instance, what responsibilities do artists have towards the cultures and traditions they draw upon? How can we ensure these folk traditions and customs are presented in a way that remains true to their communities?

Allowing the artistic framing of tradition to co-exist alongside fictional works that serve as artistic documents linked to these traditions has been a clear strategy in this process. I have come to see this reflective approach as enabling a more nuanced, situated engagement with tradition and identity, operating on the level of an exchange that clarifies artistic truths about folklore, while also allowing space for speculation and imagining alternative realities.

Political questions involved in this process relate closely to the specific local contexts where the works are situated. Acknowledging folklore's connection to communities has been an essential element of recognising the political and social dimensions of exhibition practice in folklore in this research. I have worked to ensure that conversations around artistic exchange have been a central part of creating exhibitions, with each host institution playing a vital role as a guide within the local context. This helps to create integrity surrounding the exchange with participants and the cultural context in relation to the work. It also means that the works remain anchored in local specificity, allowing the speculative processes that emerge from the studio to remain firmly anchored in a specific place.

Artistic Insight 5: Corroboration and artistic citations

Because folklore ultimately belongs to the communities that carry it forward year after year, working with these living traditions requires a relationship built on trust and shared values. As an artist, it is entirely possible to protect the integrity of these relationships, whilst maintaining a distinct creative direction, by remaining open and transparent about the project's intentions. Practices like explicitly listing collaborators and acknowledging the contributions of participating individuals and institutions act as a necessary form of artistic citation, signalling the collaborative nature of the work to the audience. As an artistic outsider, it is then possible to frame the resulting exhibitions to reflect the unique and extraordinary nature of folklore.

Serious folk humour and the end of the carnival

One important reflection has been to speculate on how folklore changes when it is removed from its traditional setting and placed within an artistic framework. Folk humour is a key example of this transformation. Often, it is precisely being taken out of its original context that generates the humour, highlighting the tensions between different cultural frameworks in which it is encountered. This kind of process engages the types of materiality often found in folklore, often playing into the disruption of the low and high in contemporary art. It offers a way of questioning the nature of humour that is intrinsic to folklore itself against the humour that emerges when folklore is recontextualised within the art world. However, questions that arise when working with folklore-as-artwork that need to be considered each time are: How does the meaning and reception of humour shift across these cultural divides? To what extent can the original humour of folklore remain intact in this new context, and how does it necessarily transform? My position in this comic relationship is one of a folk insider in conversation with an art insider. From here, it is possible to have an unspoken dialogue that celebrates the strange and particular humour of folklore that does not present it as ironic, instead valuing its specific and performative comic actions.

Much of this humour overlaps with the carnivalesque mode, a framework that has potential for subversion, chaos, and the temporary suspension of the conventions of social order. This is not to say that when folklore is engaged within an artistic context through this carnivalesque lens, that it is engaged in moments of a revolutionary sense of the carnivalesque, however. The agency of folk traditions such as the *May Man* and the *Strawbear* lies in their immediacy, the live unfolding of the ritual and the instinctive, performative energy they possess in the moment. But exhibitions of folklore-as-artwork can better be understood as documentary evidence that captures these kinds of folk entanglements of carnivalesque expression or imagined versions of that folk spirit.

Artistic Insight 6: Heterotopic documentation of the post-carnival moment

If the exhibitions in this research treat the carnivalesque as a document, it becomes possible to read them within a "post-carnival moment". The artworks in the exhibition serve as evidence, documentation, replications, and speculations regarding what has

occurred and what might yet happen. By focusing on evidence and what is evidential and left behind, the installation points to the process by which the live, performative, and the ritualistic fold back into the daily order. This "exhibition-as-pause" allows us a moment to look again at the extraordinary and topsy-turvy structures of folk humour and to consider what they mean for the resumption of ordinary contemporary life.

As Eagleton highlights, this post-carnival moment and the return to order has a structural significance that has a particular relevance for visual artworks.[313] An exhibition can function as evidential documentation of the carnivalesque, as a chance to reflect, observe, and realise what has happened as the balance tips back towards the social order. This in-between period of re-balancing the social order reveals what disruptions carnivalesque folklore might have brought and formulates a space for reflection on the real or imagined aftereffects. In this sense, art exhibitions that engage with the carnivalesque in folklore can be viewed as participating in this "post-carnival" moment, as an attempt at a knowing kind of reconciliation of the aesthetics of chaos and order.

Folklore as a sense of wonder

The long thread of this thesis has been in tracing the particularity of strangeness, wonder, and curiosity in the nuanced steps involved in artistic engagement with folklore. These states of strange wonder can all exist simultaneously, but as a reflective process, artistic research becomes productive in the framing of these, my experiences and exchanges, into a deliberate artistic strategy. Wondering contains many possible emotional and rational responses, but imagination and speculation are the artistic responses of this wondering that I have come to value most, as they deal in possibility and potential. As I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, taking strange wonder as the actual focus of an artistic method twists Bacon's concept of "broken knowledge" as a driver of scientific reasoning and enquiry onto its side. If it is drawn successfully, it can instead function more as an invitation, a precursor to knowing things. From this point of view, moments of uncertainty and confusion are integral to the creation and function of new artworks.

Artistic Insight 7: Operational wonder and speculative research
In viewing this thesis as a productive reflection on the experiments undertaken, the work does not try to approach any final definition of what folklore *is*, focusing instead on the specific qualities and effects of the practice itself. For example, by framing the extra-ordinary and strange presence of the *Strawbear*, I focused on contextualising the particularity of the tradition as it is encountered. What remains as a product of the artistic practice is a commitment to this wonder as a core strategy of the artistic research experiment. It is a persistent mirror that reflects folklore as unmapped, an ongoing and vital mystery.

Looking back at this decade of research, I realise that my work has been making use of a method of speculative documentation. The four exhibition projects can be seen as documents of a moment of reflection and the world slowly returning from the extra-ordinary to the everyday, as a way of tracing what can be aesthetically and conceptually understood. In this conceptual space of artistic research, folklore remains a parallel outsider creative act that often resists transparency. Like the characters in a mummers' play "coming in", holding the door open to speculation and imagination and other uninvited possibilities has been an essential element of the research. As strange wonder has been an operative mode at this threshold, I have used a deliberate methodology of questioning and of looking again at specific aspects of particular aspects of culture that mark places, times, and seasons. Perhaps, in the gap between what is remembered and what is imagined, this strategic strange wonder can cause a stopping of the traffic in the routine of the everyday. In this pause, there is a chance to open up other paths where the topsy-turvy logic can momentarily recalibrate the sense of what is possible, hinting at the structure of the world not as it is, but as it might be.

313 Eagleton, *Humour*, 12

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Note on Images: The blue border denotes reference artworks by other artists. Unbordered images represent original work, documentation, and research by Matthew Cowan unless cited otherwise.

IMPRINT

Folklore as Wonder
or, Speculative Methods and Artistic Transformations of Folk Customs across Gallery and Museum Practice

Matthew Cowan
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FOLKLORE AS WONDER

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Folklore as Wonder considers the material and conceptual shifts that occur when particular European folk customs are recontextualised within a contemporary art framework. Developed as artistic research across four exhibition projects, the enquiry formulates the concept of folklore-as-artwork through speculative practice, defamiliarisation, the carnivalesque, and ritualised humour. Examining institutional translocation, it generates bi-textual encounters that interrupt museum taxonomies and activate strange wonder. In tracing how folklore operates across artistic and historical contexts, the research offers a critical model for artistically re-engaging with folk traditions.

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