Screaming Strawbears and other Strange Engagements

In conversation with Matthew Cowan

by Tessa Laird

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In the lead up to his exhibition The Scream of the Strawbear *at Kunsthalle Giessen in Germany, opening on 7 September 2019, New Zealand artist Matthew Cowan, who has been based predominantly in Europe since 2001, speaks to Tessa Laird about his research on folk traditions, processions and other rituals represented in his practice.*

Matthew Cowan, *Wudewasa*, published by KEHRER, 2016 with texts by Andreas Bee and Bruce E. Phillips. ISBN: 978-3868287004, 96 pages. Photo courtesy the artist.

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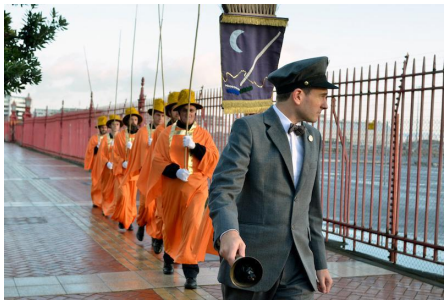
Matthew Cowan, *Maribor* from the series *Wudewasa*, 2012. Photo courtesy the artist.

TESSA LAIRD My first encounter with your practice was several years ago, when I saw photographs of some of your *Flowerbe*

ard works on the Te Tuhi billboards in Auckland in 2013. I noted the visual similarities with other works I loved by Richard Orjis and Christian Thompson, specifically their juxtapositions of certain types of masculinity with flora. I was interested in how the seeming disjunction of flowers and men, at least through a contemporary Western lens, wasn't necessarily the case in other cultures and times – for example, the Aztecs and Edo period Japanese equated flowers with male warriors because they were both inevitably 'cut down in their youth'. In 2014, I puzzled over a bizarre series of broom-like implements called *Cosmic Weight* you installed at the (now closed) Corner Window Gallery in Auckland, and it prompted me to research your practice which I saw involved extravagant, almost Nick Cave-like costumes. While the artists I've mentioned make work from queer and/or Indigenous and/or African paradigms, your work comes out of continuing European folklore traditions. I had no idea, until then, of the truly surreal quality of these costumes and traditions, all but forgotten. Your work made me keenly aware of my own ignorance, and it made me want to know more.

Later in 2014, I was fortunate to witness in person *The Terminalia of Funny-land*, a strange procession along the Auckland waterfront of white men in orange robes, carrying bamboo sticks, walking behind a flag boy and an officious bandleader ringing a bell. It was a curious, Mason-like spectacle, but it also, like most of your work, undermined any sinister connotations of secret cabals by being joyful, if not downright silly. It made me reflect on why the English folk tradition of Morris dancing, which you have often referenced in your work, is so often the subject of ridicule. In my desire to rupture the Western paradigm of my own thinking, I would often look to the traditional and folkloric practices of cultures different to my own, because I thought making work about European culture would only reaffirm whiteness. If questioned, I would ask *rhetoricall y*, "What should I do, make work about Morris dancing?" I say rhetorically, because this wasn't a real question. No one takes Morris dancing seriously, and therefore you couldn't possibly make good art about it, or so I thought.

Matthew Cowan, *I'll Sweep Your House, an installation of ritual brooms*, 2008-2014. Photo courtesy the artist.



Matthew Cowan, *The Terminalia of Funny-land*, performance, Te Tuhi, Auckland, New Zealand, 2014. Photo courtesy the artist.

TL (CONT) When I saw your work, I realised I was wrong. I also realised that Morris and a host of other Pagan European traditions, which have clung on for dear life despite millennia of Christianity, are in themselves fascinating, strange and beautiful. The problem with whiteness is that it masquerades as being normative and culture*less*, and those European folk cultural forms that still survive work against the monolithic face of Western modernity, including Christianity, capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism. So I guess I'm curious, do you see a politics in your practice? And what is it that motivates you to resurrect these dying European folk forms? What's your answer to the inevitable comparison that the Nazis were also interested in the resurrection of (a very specific branch of) European folk tradition?

MATTHEW COWAN I guess Morris dancing does have a bad reputation, and partly that could be justified by the amount of *bad* Morris dancing that exists, but I'm not calling myself an authority on that. It is a form of traditional English ritual folk dance involving people in costumes with bells around their legs, dancing with sticks or handkerchiefs and accompanied by music. It's best not performed on a stage, but rather outside or in a pub. I think you would find that there is quite a healthy population of Morris dancers in England, and that they are also spread around the world, including New Zealand. I have recently been collaborating with Boss Morris, a team of young women dancers from Stroud in Gloucestershire, and they are certainly not what you might expect if you believe the stereotypes of round-bellied old codgers in English ritual folk dance. The Boss Morris team are very good

dancers, performing in an amazing array of costumes that they have created themselves, whilst staying true to the traditions.

You might be disappointed to learn, though, that Morris dancing is not a Pagan tradition and hasn't actually been around for millennia. It is more likely a tradition that emerged out of the Renaissance as European court entertainment that made its way to England. My interest lies more in what it later transformed into – something more like what we know it to be today. In transforming itself to become more of a dance of the people, I recognise a kind of raucous essence that the Morris dance inherited. It gained a carnivalesque spirit by subverting more formal dance forms and carrying with it characters like fools and beasts. I have a personal obsession with odd and bizarre or even deeply kitschy folk customs and their power to transport you to a peculiar kind of parallel world. Perhaps these spectacles appear as odd because the significance of much of European folklore derives from historical, agricultural and seasonal customs whose relevance has evolved or faded or disappeared. What remains is a sense of meaning that is not always apparent, even to its participants.

MC (CONT) This idea though, that there exists a lineage tracing back to Pagan roots, is an alluring one. As an artist, I'm not only interested in folkloric traditions and customs themselves, but

equally in how they are identified and understood by people. In Europe, perhaps it has been integrated into a more nationalistic narrative than in the UK – where folk is hardly institutionalised and retains many local quirks and customs at a grassroots level. You are right to point out the Nazi fascination with traditional customs, something that I have been researching recently as I prepare for my upcoming show at Kunsthalle Giessen in Germany later this year. For this exhibition, I have filmed the procession of the *Strohb*ä*r*, a ritual from the German village of Königsberg in Hesse where a man, covered completely in straw, is led around the village by a large chain. There is a long tradition of *Strohb*ä*ren* in the Hesse region, something that during Nazi times was labelled as an example of an ancient Teutonic rite. However – in a similar vein to the Morris – this is not the case: it is more of a ritual that developed alongside religious calendar customs and today has evolved into something more carnivalesque and mysterious.

So in answer to your question about tracing the political in my practice, I feel the first connection is a personal one involved in the spectacle of humour, through aspects like costume, disguise and ritual. However, it is impossible to be an artist in this kind of cultural environment without dealing with contemporary and historical political narratives. These might be in exploring the historical structures of the museum (which has been my first port of call as a necessary repository for much of the material of my work), or taking time to define for myself the protocols of working with folk culture practitioners and artefacts as a contemporary artist. Placing this kind of practice in a grander political narrative is not my interest, as I find my role as an artist is more about making small connections between the sense of objects and practices. For example, I am working on connections between the historical role of the tobacco industry in Hesse, with a traditional English jig called Bacca Pipes, and in a previous work I explored the role of the butter-stealing mythological *paras* in Scandanavian folklore with a costume constructed from butter wrappers from New Zealand and other places.

When starting a new project in this field, I occupy the role of an engaged and curious outsider – as a New Zealander or as a contemporary artist. On the other hand, I am also an insider in this field, as my interest grew out of a practice of Morris dance that I

learned in Auckland in the 1990s with a young team of Morris dancers called Green Man Morris, and I have been working with specific aspects of European traditional culture for a long time now. I remember a review of a Mummers' play (a folk play performed by troupes of amateur actors) and Morris dance performance which I was a part of along with Green Man Morris at the Red Zephyr festival at The University of Auckland in the mid-90s. It described us as a "cultural alternative for lost Pakeha [sic] [non-Māori New Zealander] youth", something that we found hilarious at the time, but actually was perhaps quite a sharp observation.

Matthew Cowan, *Butterthief*, part of *para field notes*, exhibition view, Galleria Hippolyte, Helsinki, 2018. Photo courtesy the artist.

Matthew Cowan, *Butterthief*, part of *para field notes* at Galleria Hippolyte, Helsinki, 2018. Photo courtesy the artist.

Matthew Cowan, *para field notes*, exhibition view, Galleria Hippolyte, Helsinki, 2018. Photo courtesy the artist.

TL That's very interesting that Morris isn't technically Pagan, although I would argue that the figure of the Green Man that appears in much of Morris has Pagan roots as a nature deity. And in the same way that the Green Man's leafy face can be found in church architecture (along with a host of gargoyles), I would surmise that Pagan beliefs are tenacious, even if often divorced from their original meanings or surviving as mere tropes. On a more cynical note, however, I've just been reading Sylvia Federici's amazing *Caliban and the Witch* (1998), which discusses the fact that the witch hunt was not the product of medieval superstition, but rather that it arose around the Renaissance and continued through the beginnings of the Enlightenment. In fact, there was a trifecta during this period of suppression: the peasant class in Europe, women in particular, and colonisation abroad. The fact that at this same period folk dances become 'courtly entertainment', divorced from Pagan roots, seems

to me to be part of the same impulse to monitor the more 'unruly' aspects of European life, belief and expression.

But beliefs have a way of surviving. You talk about European folklore stemming from agricultural and seasonal customs, and I think this is the crux of my interest in the maintenance and revival of these forms. These days, academic and activist discourse is rife with references to not only the Anthropocene, but alternative terms such as Capitalocene, and the Plantationocene, because industrial agriculture (via capitalism and colonialism) is one of the worst drivers of environmental change. The anthropologist Michael Taussig has done a lot of work in this field, observing the environmental and social devastation in Colombia wrought by the forced imposition of sugar cane and palm oil plantations. Taussig is particularly interested in how systems of belief are both erased and secretly maintained, as well as absorbed and mutated into other systems. In his essay 'The Corn Wolf: Writing Apotropaic Texts' (2010), he notes that "In an age of agribusiness and global warming, of environmental revenge following attempts to master nature, it is worth thinking about the disappearance of the vegetable god and its sacrifice." He goes on to note that a pan-cultural archaic custom of turning the last sheaf of corn into an idol, in some places known as the 'corn wolf', doesn't exist in the supermarket. It's the loss of these apotropaic or talismanic figures that leaves us vulnerable to the much more insidious forces of free market capitalism and neoliberalism, what Taussig elsewhere calls the "magic of the state". The question is not so much, can we turn back the clock, but can we resurrect some of the spirit of these traditional agricultural rituals in order to combat monoculture in all its forms? I'm curious if you see a kind of utopian politics lurking beneath the flowers and bells in your work?

MC That's a big question for my work. As an artist, what I try to do is go through processes of unpicking, taking time to deconstruct the symbolism and the layers of social and cultural meaning. I have discussions with others involved in traditional cultural rituals and then try myself to experiment with aesthetic or contemporary connections that come up. It can be political

sometimes, but it can also lead down a more inexplicable or mysterious path.

A couple of days ago, I spent some time at two *Maimann* processions in the Hesse villages of Steinbrüken and Rittershausen. The *Maimann* figure is related to the *Strohbär*, but its significance is connected to the early summer. These celebrations happen every year at Pfingsten (Whitsun) which is a long weekend in Germany. During each event, a man covered in a huge costume constructed entirely from green leaves, circumnavigates the village while children run around and collect eggs and bacon from houses along the route. At the end of the procession, there is a party where scrambled eggs or pancakes are eaten and it seems the whole village turns up.

Matthew Cowan, *Feathered Wildman*, 2014. Photo courtesy the artist.

The Maimann, Rittershausen, 2019. Photo courtesy the artist.

MC (CONT) I spent some time watching the process of the *Maimann* costume being created and I talked to the people who were building it. It's quite a process as the leaves have to be bound tightly and built up strongly enough to support his tall floral headpiece. In both villages there is a long tradition of *Maimann* processions and there are amazing photographs in the Hessen photographic archives of past *Maimann* processions. Some of these

archive images and footage from the weekend will appear in my upcoming exhibition at Kunsthalle Giessen this September.

The magic that happens at events like the *Maimann* is about people coming together around a deeply strange custom, acknowledging it almost unquestioningly and by that process acknowledging the psychogeography of the place they are in. It's possible to approach traditional events such as the *Maimann* from many angles – ethnographic, political, cultural or social – but artistically, I'm most interested in deconstructing and reassembling the spectacle, reimagining them in a different contextual order to understand why, when they occur, such scenes feel so strange. I like to examine the processes at play, such as disguise, masking and the spirit of humorous performance. In this way I guess the resonance for me is the psychological angle.

The example of the supermarket given by Taussig is an interesting case to think about. I have always loved the video performance *The Hunt* by Christian Jankowski, where he shoots his groceries in the supermarket with a bow and arrow, as, absurdly, it takes us back to another kind of economic system. At the *Maimann*, the visual spectacle of the figure of a half tree/half man crossing the road at the traffic lights, or of walking past the local shops also seems incredibly absurd. These kinds of folk customs have the ability to throw out moments of such estrangement between the contemporary, ordinary everyday and the bizarre.

TL I think what you're talking about goes back to my very first impressions of your work: surrealism. But what your work demonstrates is that surrealism wasn't an invention of the 20th century. Every culture practices some sort of engagement with the strange, the inexplicable. And they often do so with humour, to undercut the inevitable pomposity of priests and spiritual power brokers. Octavio Paz puts it beautifully when discussing the paradoxical presence of laughter in pre-Columbian sacrifice: "Through laughter the world turns into a playing field once again, a sacred precinct, not a place for work... The world is not made for humans; the world and humans are made for the gods. Work is serious; death and laughter rip off its mask of solemnity.

Through death and laughter, the world and human beings become toys once again."[01]

There's a kind of joy in your work which I would say goes beyond the 'psychological', meaning that it's not about the personal histories and hang-ups of the individual. It's more about the trans-personal affect, a space of communal subjectivity. But I gather your upcoming project does try to forge some more personal stories and connections?

MC It's nice that you connect my work with a surrealist logic as I have been recently interested in the centenary of Dada and thinking about its carnivalesque precursors which can be found in folk rituals. It's a recurring process for me, this artistic obsession with the translation of *so-called* low cultures such as folk and pop into *so-called* high cultures such as fine art and theatre. As art though, humour of the strange kind, which stems from folklore, takes on a different meaning. You could say that the presentation of 'ordinary' humour in a gallery setting rarely generates a laugh-out-loud response. One reason for this is that artists use humour as a device to serve the artwork itself. Another is that people often visit galleries as individuals, and laughter usually operates as a social mechanism in groups. This is itself a clue to understanding

that folkloristic and pop culture references are so much about social and community means of understanding the world.

Yes, it's important for me to corroborate and exchange on a personal level as a cultural practitioner. I now live with my family in Berlin, and for this new exhibition, as well as working with new communities in Germany (such as the *Traditionsverein* (traditional association) who organise the *Strohbär* in Königsberg and the *Fire wehr* (fire services) who organise the *Maimann*), I have also had the chance to work with some people in New Zealand and in England whom I have known for much longer.

One of these was traditional folk singer Dave Barnes, whom I have known since the 1990s, and met up with when I was in Wellington last summer. We worked together on making some songs out of fragments of myths and folktales that had been collected from the countryside around Hesse, where I have been researching. I shot some videos of Dave performing these as songs in the native bush he planted on his land in Tawa. When I present this in the exhibition, they will have been through a number of translations – from German to English and back, from Hesse to Wellington and back, from speech to text to song, and from performance of a kind to a video presentation. This process charts a kind of cultural topsy-turviness that personally feels quite normal to me, having grown up in Auckland with English heritage. It will bring some New Zealand native bush to sit alongside the songs of the *Maimann* and the screams of the Strawbear.

Footnotes

01. Octavio Paz, "Laughter and Penitence", *Essays on Mexican Art*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993, pp. 53-54

Biographies

Matthew Cowan is a New Zealand artist working in the realm of traditional European traditional customs. His works are photographs, videos, installations and performances, which play with the inherent strangeness of the continued popularity of long-established folk customs in a modern world. These works can be viewed as performative, playing with the elements of folk rituals which give people a link to the past.

Recent exhibitions have included artistic responses to artefacts and folk objects in museum collections, delving into structures that guide perceptions of popular histories and re-examining what is suggested as evidence in the historical presentation of identity. Selected solo exhibitions include: *The Scream of the Strawbear*, Kunsthalle Giessen, Germany (2019); *para field notes*, Galleria Hippolyte, Helsinki, Finland (2018); *Wandle auf Rosen und Vergissmeinnicht*, Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum, Braunschweig, Germany (2016); and *Equinox Men*, Kunstverein Langenhagen, Hannover, Germany (2016).

Tessa Laird is a Pākehā writer and artist and Lecturer in Critical and Theoretical Studies at VCA Art, Victorian College of the Arts, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne. Tessa was an art critic in New Zealand for over twenty years, writing for numerous magazines, journals, and catalogues and editing *Monica Reviews Art and Log Illustrated*. Her books include fictocritical responses to colour: *A Rainbow Reader* (Clouds, 2013), and a cultural history of bats: *Bat* (Reaktion, 2018). She was the editor of *Art + Australia Online* from 2016-2019, and in 2021 she edited a special issue of the *Art + Australia* journal with the theme "Multinaturalism".

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