



BOYCOTT THE ARCHIVE

RICHARD GRAYSON

The collection from which this *Folk Archive* exhibition is drawn has its roots in a conversation in 1998 between Alan Kane and Jeremy Dellar. They were talking about the corporate representations of UK culture that were starting to emerge at the Millennium Dome—the vast new labour carbuncle erected on marshy ground in Greenwich to mark the start of another thousand years. Even at that early stage, the Dome seemed to be heading into problematic naffness, a naffness that was taking on philosophical weight and metaphysical import. A branded, sponsored, access-led, dumbed down, feel-good, pre-digested, milestoned, toxic über-naff picture of the UK, which was troubling even as a rumour before the full vacuous horror of the UK PLC [programmable logic controller] enterprise culture experience was revealed on New Year's Eve, when the first night visitors tumbled off the delayed, crowded trains to the opening.

Their conversation was about how a present day 'folk art' might be constituted and how this might provide some sort of representation, or understanding, of the cultures of Britain as they actually exist outside of the corporate constructions that underlay the 'Cool Britannia' re-branding, focused on mod-revivalism, Oasis and designer Indian restaurants as

iconic expressions of the country. Both had individual collections of 'modest objects and pictures' of the sort of things that they were interested in. Seven years later these collections have expanded into this topsy-turvy display of cigarettes made out of flowers; tattoo guns improvised from the innards of ball-point pens and cassette radio players from Her Majesty's prisons; canvas and papier-mâché elephants on wheels with backs that open up into seats; trade union banners and video footage of crowds of drunken men rolling burning barrels though darkened village streets or chasing muddy cheeses downhill watched by their puzzled children. A cornucopia of strange everyday art-making. There's a Hogarthian feel to this in a gross and vibrant in-your-face-shouty, spraying potato-chips way, with Michael Jackson and skull motor bike helmets moving through the nation's restless six-pack take-away curry unconscious; there are dog-poops and luminous willies from joke-shop windows and hobby-horses from village folk dances, all in promiscuous discourse with illuminated sick-notes and drawings of farting clouds with legs.

For a show that's so aware of its own cutting-edge cool, there's a strange old fashionedness to the undertaking. Similar exhibitions have happened before, but way back when, in the days when there was a clear relationship between aesthetic investigation and a political agenda. Art was to get down with the people

and it was to reflect the activities that the bourgeoisie and high culture excluded. To value the culture of the working classes was a central Socialist aim—before the word socialism became a puzzling or quaint relic. It was all part and parcel of forging class solidarity and recovering a people's history—such aims informed the activities of visionaries such as Raphael Samuel and the people's history movement and the projects of the Artist Placement Group and subsequent art in working-life programs that ran from the sixties to the early '80s. Art was inescapably entangled with the possibilities of social and political revolution.

This show makes you realise quite how much time has passed since these ideas were pretty much mainstream. Today they've started to take on a folksy feel themselves, like blacksmithery or a handiness with fancy knotwork—activities and skills that have become slowly unanchored from the productive structures of society. 'Radicality' in the arts in the west now requires sheltered workshops and so it's become a largely academic franchise, with hip professors and pedants using arcane ideological structures to prove their sensitivity, insight and essential superiority. It's like speaking Latin. This leads to congratulatory and self-aggrandising practices that claim profundity through borrowing the experience and suffering of others—a 'political' art that feeds the voyeuristic deracinated needs of

its audience. And right now it's 'big' across the cultural franchises of the contemporary art world and gets research points too, despite—or maybe because of—the now profound unlikelihood of a fundamental social or political revolution taking place any time soon in western capitalist economies.

On the whole, I think that Jeremy Dellar avoids the charge of a fashionable embrace of revolutionary chic, although I'm not sure that the arts establishment, who have supported him so energetically are as innocent. Dellar's take on 'political practice' seems less absolute than his peers and more melancholic. He keeps on conjuring up the ghosts of past models of radical engagement, and makes work about them, as in the *Battle of Orgreve*—where enthusiasts who normally replay battles from the English Civil War were asked to restage a famous clash between striking miners and the police. But hopefully this is more than an act of sympathetic magic that seeks to claim the power of political engagement through mimesis—a depressing commonplace in contemporary 'engaged' practice. I like to think instead that Dellar realises that the contexts that allowed such actions are irrevocably gone and that the work is conceived as a monument to this loss and to pose the question. Well what can we do now? Given the extraordinary political and ideological shifts of the last two decades, how can we express the desire for justice and define areas of autonomy; how do we develop resistant cultures in the constant onslaught of capital and the market place? Of course this could be merely wishful thinking on my part.

Ghosts of past approaches make themselves particularly at home in the *Folk Archive*. The title itself is haunted by awkward resonance. After all, everybody laughs at folk—lukewarm beer, fingers in the ear, beards and a tuneless meandering 'Fol de rol de ra' and bells on your legs. At the same time we are seeing one of the cyclical revivals of interest in folk music... I've long held that in times of cultural uncertainty there's a revival in folk music and performance art. It's the search for some sort of 'authentic' or 'real'. The last time they were both big was around the early to mid-'70s, when naked men wrestled in offal against the constructions of Capital and Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span and the Bushwackers were at their fashionable peak. Until punk came along and swept them all away [the brief arrival of a real 'real' if you wish]. Then the world got all postmodern on our ass. The very first efflorescence of interest in folk culture was admittedly unencumbered by performance art. It was in response to the shockwaves of the Industrial Revolution and the rapid urbanisation of the British workforce at the end of the nineteenth century. People



started looking back and seeking to preserve a lost, rural Eden. Cecil Sharpe travelled the country collecting surviving songs going as far as the Smokey Mountains in the USA to find pre-lapsarian survivals. Much of what is considered the English folk tradition is in fact fictional and is instead the production of a Victorian romanticism that required the return of Druids in groves and the dancing of the maypole. This was given impetus by the impact of the massive work of comparative mythology *The Golden Bough* by J.M. Frazier, published at the start of the twentieth century, which encouraged the idea that in every village hall and church ritual between Slough and Gretna Green we could find rituals that were the echoes and restoration of profoundly ancient Bronze Age fertility cults, based on human sacrifice. In fact many of the traditions that we regard as linking back to time immemorial can only be traced back as far as, say, 1938 and we see in towns across the UK folk dances and festivals that are as deeply embedded in the indigenous traditions of the area, as are those of the Longford morris dancers in Launceston, Tasmania.

The current interest in ideas of 'folk' maintains this tradition of being nearly totally constructed. Part of the *Folk Archive* exhibition is a series of lunchtime concerts taking place at the Barbican—featuring musicians such as Adem and Bob Stanley from St. Etienne—musicians who are 'nu-folk'... edging into 'folktronica'—both of which are remarkable at focusing nearly entirely on new composition, rather than anything that's to do with traditional folk songs. But somehow they aspire to the sense of an ongoing narrative, some lost community that the tag 'folk' seems to engender.

It's salutary here to remember that Le Pen, the man behind the renaissance of the semi-fascist, racist National Front in France started his public life running a folk music recording label, preserving the traditions that he saw as fast disappearing.

This is not to accuse the Archive of Fascism, but any such enterprise brings into being the dangers associated with any such search for 'identity'. It is inevitably caught up with ideas of nationhood and self and therefore nationalism, racism and xenophobia. Australia has seen much work celebrating the cultures of country car crash derbies or the demotic sculptural outbreaks of the giant prawns, pineapples or rocking chairs. But this has always been accompanied by the queasy acknowledgement of the way that these same cultures have had a role in erasing far older indigenous folk traditions of the country, which are now as distant and unknown to non-Aboriginal Australia as were the Bronze Age rituals that fascinated Frazier. In the British context it is harder to see the other darker side of such celebrations and easier to see them as entirely representative of some lost virtue. And perhaps the Eden here is the idea of the working class itself being lost in the current flux and amorphousness, as old patterns are erased by the rapacious developments in production. It may also talk of a smaller loss resulting from the metropolitan enervation of the contemporary artist, largely unanchored from any particular community or class which is not that of the world they move through. These specific deaths are symptomatic of the vast global extinctions of identity, society and community and the destruction and casualisation of labour that untrammelled, unopposed capital imposes.

Previous investigations of 'folk art' have gone hand in hand with an implied understanding of the existence of 'high art'. Even in the radical seventies there was the presumption of a 'progressive practice' that underpinned the interest in demotic expression. Much of the work that focused on the overlooked or disregarded was as interested in making an art work out of systems of taxonomy and acts of re-presentation as it was in a serious engagement with an art of the people [although of course these desires were not exclusive]. With the death of the avant-garde however, we have been ushered into a period of cultural miscegenation. In postmodernity what was low has been made high and that which was high has become low and they're all grist to the mill of sale and exchange. What we have instead are artefacts that are of financial value and artefacts that are without financial value. These sets are fluid and not fixed. In this situation the Duchampian act of the readymade has been extended by the market to enable the artist to declare whether a thing has dollar value, rather than just nominating it as 'art'. A dog made out of flowers or a porcelain bouquet has a considerably different value if it's made by an Austrian worker rather than by an assistant of Jeff Koons.

The political charge of the *Folk Art Archive* as currently constituted may now lie in it foregrounding an entire area of work and production that has not [yet] been commodified. Objects which are held to be without value, other than by those who have made the particular cake, banner, drawing, tattoo gun, or those who use the cake, banner, drawing or tattoo gun—artefacts and cultural productions that at the moment resist the market's ability to absorb the most unlikely things into its systems of exchange. When you walk around the Archive, there is something really moving and affecting in the wealth and diversity of these expressions, art that is uninfluenced and undetermined

by the demands and expectations of the artworld and/or marketplace [when there is no clear difference in the work to be found in a biennale and the work to be found in an art fair we have to accept that they are synonymous]. You exit the show reflecting that the urge to make things and images is pretty deeply embedded in the nervous system, deeper than those circuits that require definitions of 'art' and 'not art'—that there is some level of symbolic 'doing' that is essential to the electrical network that makes us human. And it's humbling and inspiring to see.

Of course, the irony of all this is that its valuation by the artists and its presentation in a [publicly funded] space is just part of the process of valorisation that will transmute today's resistant artefact into tomorrow's desirable commodity, to be represented and exchanged in the market place—paralleling the way that artists have become the avant-garde for the real estate developers, moving into the areas today that will be desirable tomorrow. This process of opening up more and more territory to the market becomes inevitable the more successful Jeremy Dellar becomes. Think what Andy Warhol did for the status—and price—of cookie jars. So, to limit the reach of the market, boycott this show.

The Folk Archive, Contemporary Popular Art from the UK

Curators Jeremy Dellar and Alan Kane
Barbican Gallery, London
12 May – 24 July, 2005
barbican.org.uk

Opposite page Left: Snowdrop the Mechanical Elephant, The Clare Family, Egremont, Cumbria 2004
Right: Tom Harrington, Cumberland and Westmoreland Wrestling Champion, Egremont, Cumbria, 1999
Above: Young Girls dressed as Old Ladies, Blackpool, 2000
Below: Tommy Mattinson, World Gurning Champion 2004, Egremont Cumbria 2004
Photos courtesy the Barbican Art Gallery, London

