DANDELION
postgraduate arts journal & research network

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 2 SPRING 2015

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Exhibition Review

British Folk Art: The house that Jack built

Exhibition Info: Tate Britain, June to August 2014; Compton Verney, September to December 2014

Vicky Sparrow

The relocation of folk art from its traditional museum-setting into the gallery space is a decisive move: one which demands that attention be paid to the aesthetics of a movement often considered a genre of social history. Tate Britain's main summer attraction 'British Folk Art: The house that Jack built' is a showcase of vernacular folk art which the museum claims, 'aims to reassess [folk art's] position in art history' – a laudable aim, as folk art (particularly in the UK) has suffered neglect from both disciplinary and curatorial perspectives. The exhibition's three curators venture that folk objects are 'also of artistic interest', while one curator, artist Jeff McMillan, offers 'a generalisation about folk art': that 'it has its origin in tradition. It has been passed down and is therefore representative of a sense of the collective.' The major difficulty for this show, then, is how to explore the specific form of representation of collective life particular to folk art, within the Tate Britain gallery setting with its attendant establishment aesthetic and commercial values.

The aesthetic emphasis imposed on the reception of the work through this gallery setting is in part a response to folk art's current fashionableness. In the art world the folk art trend found early expression in Jeremy Deller and

Alan Kane's 1999 exhibition *Folk Archive*; a hallucinatory assortment of hand-made artefacts found in contemporary Britain that ranged from trade union banners to sequined hot pants. Interest has since burgeoned; this year's Berlin Biennale was held in the city's Ethnologisches Museum where contemporary art was presented amidst displays of folk art and culture. Some Biennale artists employed objects from the museum in their artistic production, in a move reminiscent of Grayson Perry's use of the British Museum's permanent collection last year in his sophisticated part-curation, part-installation *Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. Deller's most recent show in Bristol, *English Magic*, (a restaging of his Venice Biennale show) also explores modes of conceptualising folk art as a contemporary vernacular form. The homespun aesthetic of artists like Perry, Tracy Emin and Bob and Roberta Smith has inevitably found its way into the mass market, chiefly via Cath Kidston's pandemic of very British kitsch, along with Kidston's cousin Kirsty Allsopp (the daughter of a Baron and a Tory advisor) who followed suit producing a television show that featured her earnestly fitting out her second home in Dorset with a variety of handmade miscellanea. While folk art has always been intimately connected with issues of class, labour, ethnicity, tradition, gender and community, this Tate Britain exhibition arrives at a time where prevalent use and co-option of folk-style makes questions regarding these matters more insistent.

Kitsch and folk art may have many moments of intersection but one point Clement Greenberg, one of the more influential theoretical voices in this debate, has made clear is the fundamentally political nature of their difference. Kitsch, according to Greenberg, removes the effort of reflection required in the viewing of high art by reproducing a synthetic form of this reflective labour within the piece, making it readily available for immediate consumption. Greenberg tells us that kitsch's quality of unreflective immediacy is why it can be used as a manipulative tool, an affect to which folk art is resistant. He writes of the ease with which political regimes 'inject effective propaganda into [kitsch]' and of how such regimes find kitsch useful in placating the demands of their subjects, who 'are hungry […] for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide'. As these subjects 'can enjoy kitsch without effort', Greenberg reasons, it prevents them from reflecting too deeply, and too critically. These ideas seem today to resonate all too well; and so it is in our contemporary age of austerity that we are led to believe, through kitsch, that even the aristocracy learn to make do and mend. Keep calm and carry on: we're all in this together.

The current ubiquity of kitsch undoubtedly informed Tate's choice to showcase its more established cousin. McMillan writes that on being offered the project he 'was initially a little hesitant […because] the word "folk" comes with baggage, freighted with notions of the homespun or even kitsch'. Apart from a few derisory mentions of kitsch, real engagement with it as the insistent 'freight 'of folk art is oddly avoided in the exhibition and its literature. The problem is intensified by the curators' choice to paint the gallery's hanging walls in bold primary colours. Upon entering, we encounter a bright yellow wall laden with historic shop signs, followed by a series of Farrow and Ball-esque 'tasteful' shades. Perhaps the curators intended the colour choice to reflect the alternative aesthetic values viewers might adopt at a show of art by non-artists. Disappointingly, we also find cutesy hand drawn diagrams in the accompanying booklet, which serve to undermine the show's aesthetic and cultural importance and produce an overall sense of telling us that we don't need to take folk art too seriously; it's enjoyable, funny, quirky and, yes, a bit kitschy.

The difficulty in defining what actually constitutes folk art is pre-emptively dealt with in the press release: this exhibition 'examines the contradictory notions of folk art, reflecting the ways in which historians, artists, curators and collectors have defined folk art in the UK'. While this suggests a general problem of disciplinarity and nomenclature, the complex social reasons behind the lack of engagement with folk art in Britain are overlooked. The political and economic sidelining of folk art in favour of the more politically pliable kitsch and the more economically productive 'high art', with its lucrative markets and monopolies, isn't considered. While inadequate definitions of folk art may be recognised to be a contributing factor in the art form's lowly status, Tate's curators don't set about using their platform to definitively characterise it: 'this exhibition does not set out a single narrative or definition of folk art. As curators we decided from the beginning not to attempt this'. In fact, the curators write that 'this exhibition showcases objects […] that already have a history as folk art'. Crucially, they fail to register that there has been a recent mobilisation of folk (in its various forms), championing its fundamental grassroots capacity for expressing popular resistance and critiques of inequality; one thought-provoking example being Alex Niven's *Folk Opposition*. Frustratingly, the curators have sidestepped important questions about what a contemporary working definition of folk art and its political possibilities might be.

The opening room of the exhibition greets visitors with a crowded display of shop signs from the 1660s through to the 1950s, most of which are late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some of these objects are beautifully crafted: for example, a cobbler's giant leather boot-sign features intricate heart-shaped pinwork on its sole. Viewed from below, as it would have been, it seems to playfully suggest that when in the world of commerce, we would do well to examine what resides beneath. The arrangement of the trade signs, all vying for space on one wall, encourages us to give them a cursory glance, before moving on; they are, it seems, self-explanatory, chosen as objects not for their specificity, but to serve as examples. As the curators intended to exhibit objects that have a 'history as folk art', the inclusion of signs is surprising. Trade signs would most likely have been fashioned by jobbing carpenters and are therefore examples of skilled, professional labour. This contradicts prevalent definitions of folk art, which tend to require elements of the non-professional or self-taught. The decision to include items both produced and used commercially surely seeks to subdue the potent connections between folk art and non-commercial labour; as a result the curators' apparent reluctance to define their genre seems a little disingenuous.

The next vari-coloured space exhibits more traditional visual art forms. Firstly we see painted wooden pub signs and notices of bylaws, with the most interesting being an eighteenth century anti-vagrancy sign. Next we see that the far corner is devoted to work by the early-nineteenth century tailor, George Smart, who supplemented his income by producing vernacular scenes from leftover scraps of tailors' material, using the needlework technique of appliqué. The accompanying text points to the consistency in Smart's naïve style, as he depicts eccentric locals across multiple copies of the same composition, repeating such images not because of their folkic authenticity, the text claims, but for their potential saleability. What this suggestion misses is that the display of multiple repetitions of Smart's compelling compositions implicitly serves to critique value based upon an authenticity which presupposes the idea of an authored original. This concept of value is, of course, heavily mobilised by the art market to support its investment in private virtuosity to secure monopolies.

The thought of Smart rag-picking through scraps of material to produce affectionate images of his local community, along with his use of traditional techniques to imprint a narrative and geography on his work, serves to make it eminently likeable.

Figure 1. George Smart, *Goose Woman* c 1840. Image courtesy of Tunbridge Wells Museum and Art Gallery

Other paintings in this room depict scenes of coastal, rural and urban life displaying the idiosyncratically untutored style characteristic of folk art. The unattributed 'Champion Ratcatcher' (circa 1840) depicts a black whippet mauling scattering bloodied rats who find themselves terrifyingly hemmed in by carefully rendered wooden boards. The unconventional dark palette, subjective perspective and scale create an unsettling and nightmarish composition, producing a kind of material immediacy rarely found in fine art. Another anonymous artist's work, 'A Bird's Eye View of Market Street Wymondham' (circa 1850), playfully features the blackbird from whose perspective we view the winding streets of the town below. The inclusion of this bird brings to mind critical theorist Walter Benjamin's claim that what is

unique to folk art is its ability to enfold the subjective perspective within the artwork. In his fragmentary essay on vernacular form, Benjamin wrote that 'we experience via folk art not as a bystander – we have wrapped ourselves up in it'.[1] Like the bird's eye view, the eye of the viewer is not abstracted out of the frame, but incorporated within it as a necessary element: we find ourselves wrapped up inside the folk artwork, looking out.[2] This unknown artist's radical engagement with perspective also reveals folk art's capacity for critique. Here is a playful response to fine art's tendency for humourless abstraction, which shuts out the spectator: our little blackbird ally seems to wink at us conspiratorially.

In a nearby cabinet we find other intriguing objects: four examples of the late nineteenth-century practice of crafting a 'God in a Bottle'. These are thick glass bottles containing wooden carvings of crosses and other shapes, eerily suspended in a murky liquid. While they are assumed to have a religious or devotional meaning, being found most often in Catholic homes of the north-east of England, their exact purpose is obscure. These abstruse objects seem to exude what Benjamin calls the 'magical ability'[3] of folk art. For Benjamin, this magic is actually related to processes of production, as he writes that 'all folk art incorporates the human being within itself'.[4] Incorporation, here, is crucially twofold: it is both the enveloping of the viewer within the folk artwork, and also the earlier incorporation of traces of the artist in the work during its production.[5] The raw material of folk art being the stuff of everyday life enables the labour of the hand that crafts to remain present in the resulting objects, along with the communities that gather invisibly around their production. The mysterious labour of the producer of the 'God in a Bottle' is certainly expressed in its captivating quality, but it is also represented literally. Wooden objects suspended alongside the carved crosses include a small hammer, a ladder, a book and a wheel: all presumed to represent the hobbies and vocations of their makers. In these artworks about work, the labour of the hand is placed next to the sacred for purposes of devotion and purity, lending it a quality of 'magic'.

The paintings of the self-taught Cornish artist and rag and bone merchant Alfred Wallis (1855-1942) are exhibited in a corner close by. Although championed by artist luminaries of his time, Wallis died in poverty in a workhouse. Wallis' strong blue palette, thick sweeping lines and flagrant ignoring of contemporary art establishment principles of visual style, combine to lend this corner a compelling exuberance. While Wallis' work perhaps exemplifies folk artistic style, the embroidered compositions of Mary Linwood (1755-1845), the only other artist to be endorsed by having their own section in the exhibition, curiously goes against the grain of usual assumptions about folk art. Linwood's work, apparently famous in its day, features wool embroidery-work over copies of well known masters. The accompanying signage elaborates that 'she remains largely unclassifiable, lacking the originality demanded of the fine artist, and the "authenticity" required of the folk artist, yet is also disconnected from domestic craft traditions.' Linwood's work is bizarre, cloying and sentimental, but there remains something uncannily compelling about a room full of her thickly over-determined images, all of which seem to teeter uncomfortably on the edge of being indisputably hideous. The overall effect is more disturbing by far than any Bacon triptych or Chapman Brothers installation. Kitsch it is; it certainly induces immediate affect, but it mobilises something else too, something uncanny, almost inhuman, that often seems to lurk darkly in schmaltz. The work creates a kind of implosion of kitsch, the weight of its sentimentality pulling itself apart to reveal (what Greenberg considers to be) the unreflective violence constitutive of its genre.

The adjacent room is populated with monstrous ships' figureheads, oddly resembling a fairground, as most of the wooden sculptures (again, originally made by professional carpenters) have been so heavily restored that they appear as glossy as replicas. The largest amongst them is the figurehead of the Royal Navy's HMS *Calcutta*, launched in 1831. This carving is made of Indian Hardwood and depicts the bust of an Indian man with staring eyes, a large necklace and exaggerated features. It was made in Mumbai, by a colonial subject who had carved an image of himself, seemingly to glorify the power of his colonial oppressors. This room presents many such images of self-representation violently forced on the colonial subject, all cheerfully enclosed in periwinkle blue walls. It's an odd take on folk art, and again presents the dangers of kitsch's propensity for communicating politically manipulative messages. The curators' inclusion of these objects as forms of folk art – as if they are equivalent to other indigenous forms of woodcarving – problematically fails to register the dynamic of oppression between the colonised craftsman and the colonial commissioner. This is 'folk art' struggling to represent anything more than the violence of social domination. It is particularly in moments such as these, when the boundaries of the genre are fraught and complex, that the curators' disinclination to define folk art, and their total aversion to mentioning class, drastically weakens the exhibition.

In the final room, embroidered lettering samplers by educated schoolgirls sit alongside functional patchwork quilts. The haphazard designs of the 'crazy patchworks' exhibited here would have been created with whatever textile scraps the maker could find; such patterns are indexical of their conditions of necessity. The question of labour in many ways seems more pressing in folk art than in fine art, as the purpose of the production of folk art seems a more inextricable part of its meaning. Immanent in this collection of textiles are questions of craft's relationship with leisure, as well as its relationship with necessity and the reuse of waste material. Poverty, class and leisure are, however, not addressed in the exhibition text, which doesn't consider any difference between the aesthetics or production of these pieces.

Such issues resurface in the selection of 'boody ware' exhibited nearby. To produce boody ware, the thrifty housewife of the nineteenth century would safely store away any broken bits of pottery and then collect them together and refashion them into ceramic plates, 'new' but scarred all over. Of course, another hugely important social question raised here is that of gender. The exhibition does a good job in presenting folk art as being gender-neutral, with examples of crafts made by both men and women (the decision to include professional work shifts the usual balance). Most domestically useful crafts would have been learned and practised by women running tight economies at home. Like most women of my generation who can crochet, knit and make clothes, I was taught these skills by my mother and grandmothers. The gender bias in non-professional craft labour is part of the form's wider social meaning. This is even reflected in the show's contemporary audience: a cursory glance around on my visit took in a lot more women than men. A major flaw in approaching folk artwork on aesthetic grounds alone is that the importance of its social production, that which differentiates it historically from fine art and from kitsch, ends up being suppressed, and folk art is presented as a form of quirky, superficial 'art-lite'.

Folk art has always had connections with destitution and survival, and this is a context the exhibition does encourage us to encounter through various war-related objects in cabinets dotted around the space. Living through war is expressed in the intricate pincushions made by women for their sweethearts

(who were departing for the Crimean and First World wars) bearing pitiful embroidered inscriptions such as 'forget me not' and 'remember me'.

Figure 2. Artist Unknown, *Heart pincushion* Beamish, The Living Museum of the North. Photo: Tate Photography.

Elsewhere, a roll-call of names of decorated World War One soldiers is hand stitched in a multi-coloured spiral round and round a large circle of white linen, in what we can only assume was an unknown woman's form of coming-to-terms with the devastations of war. The bright bold colours of an enormous quilt of over ten thousand pieces belie its production by convalescing Crimean War soldiers. The caption to the quilt tells us that 'the creation of such labour-intensive textiles was promoted among servicemen as a form of therapy'. A cockerel made by a French prisoner of war held in a Cambridgeshire camp during the Napoleonic War was crafted out of bones collected from the waste of the camp kitchens. The production of such an object was hardly a leisure pursuit, as the act of labour here seems also to function as a form of therapy, or at least an absorbing distraction, within a destitute context. Such objects seem to truly embody, however damaged, 'a spark of a life that is integrated harmoniously with labour'.[6]

Figure 3. Artist Unknown, *Bone cockerel* (detail) Vivacity Culture and Leisure – Peterborough Museum

In the exhibition's final room, the influential 1951 textbook *English Popular Art* by Margaret Lambert and Enid Marx is laid out in a small cabinet amongst other published material on folk art. It lies open provocatively at a page where Lambert and Marx write that 'the "innocent eye" is disappearing in England, not, we think, entirely due to mechanisation, but rather from changing social habits, bringing a certain lack of initiative and interest in things with a distinctive individual character'.[7] Lambert and Marx suggest that as 'we buy more from chain stores, the country craftsmen are dying out and with them that individuality in design and decoration that gave life to the old popular art'.[8] Not only mechanisation and change in conditions of production, according to Lambert and Marx, but also the pressure of (multi-) national chain stores monopolising and homogenising the market and standardising good taste, have left idiosyncratic folk artisans without an audience. Of course, the current mass production of folksy-looking things for the home demonstrates the form's

recuperation, but only as an insipid style evacuated of its once 'distinctive individual character': its 'life' and the magic of its formation.

The book's argument also hints at another important point. As most of the show's objects are nineteenth and twentieth-century, they are produced within the context of modernity and well after Britain's industrial revolution; they are not the production of ancient, isolated or 'primitive' communities. Their continued production cannot just be put down to nostalgia for an 'innocent eye', but can be read as a critique of the value and mode of labour in modernity. Esther Leslie and Ben Watson put it succinctly thus: 'Art's politics may be borne in its formal structures – for example […] folk art as assertion of alternative anti-modern values'.[9] However, the Tate's exhibition ends up ignoring folk art's implicit (and at times explicit) critique of modernity: of its aesthetics and of its social and industrial relations. Through folk art we look out from a world of living objects to an inanimate landscape of commodities and abandoned collective practices. As long as fine art runs the risk of exhibiting a 'bloodless, hands-off aestheticism',[10] it remains open to folk art's inhabited critique. Curatorial efforts such as these, which seek to recuperate folk forms as simply alternative methods for making art, lose the social immediacy of their critiques. Despite this show containing some of the most fascinating, magical folk objects in the country, the exhibition leaves one with a pervading sense of loss. At this present historical moment, the fact is we could all benefit socially from the collective power of folk, but this narrative is repressed by Tate's curation of folk art as something to be dominated, historicised and valued simply in aesthetic terms. The curators, finally, miss this opportunity to wrest folk art, as a genre, from its contemporary anaemic and manipulated incarnation, which ultimately serves the objectives of those for whom folk art's collective power is anathema.

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Notes

1 Walter Benjamin, 'Some Remarks on Folk Art', in Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927-1934, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. by Rodney Livingston (London: Harvard UP, 1999), pp. 278-79 (p. 279).

2 Benjamin, 'Some Remarks on Folk Art', p. 279. Benjamin's final sentences of his essay elucidate: 'Art teaches us to look into objects. | Folk art and kitsch allow us to look outward from within objects.'

3 Benjamin, 'Some Remarks on Folk Art', p. 279.

4 Benjamin, 'Some Remarks on Folk Art', p. 278.

5 Benjamin elaborates on this argument more complexly in his 1936 essay, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', found in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 83-107.

6 Esther Leslie, 'Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft', *Journal of Design History*, 11.1(1998), 5-13 (p. 8).

7 Margaret Lambert and Enid Marx, *English Popular Art* (New York: BT Batsford, 1951), p. v.

8 English Popular Art, p. v.

9 Esther Leslie and Ben Watson, 'A Statement of Militant Esthetix', <http://www.militantesthetix.co.uk/situationist/aquasit.htm> [accessed 20 August 2014].

10 Leslie, 'Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft', p. 12.

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