THE FIGURES IN FOLK PROJECT

Mellany Robinson, Robin Christian and Val Williams

Figures of Folk is a collaboration between the UAL Photography and the Archive Research Centre (ARL), the Museum of British Folklore, LCC Green Week and the LCC Letterpress Workshop. It explores ongoing traditions through a series of large format photographs by Graham Goldwater, of objects associated with British folklore, alongside letterpress posters created by LCC students, inspired by ancient phrases and words. By exploring an archive of material objects, new archives have been created.

In 2009, Simon Costin, the Director of the Museum of British Folklore, put out a call to the nation’s Morris sides to replicate their team kit in miniature, as handmade dolls. Nearly three hundred sides participated in the creation of a physical archive. Together with the Morris dolls, The Museum of British Folklore owns a collection of jig dolls – articulated wooden figures, which were used by street performers to create a rhythmic beat and movement, resembling traditional folk dance. Both collections have been photographed by Graham Goldwater, exploring the ways in which the photographic image both documents museum objects and extends their meaning and reach. Both object and photograph become an artefact of dancing and celebration which has taken place in Britain for nearly five hundred years.

As a temporal equivalent, letterpress has also been in continuous existence since the 15th century and the work produced by LCC students, Oliver Zandi, Emily Todd and Vaida Klimaviciute, pays homage to this tradition. Much as Morris dancing has grown in popularity after an earlier decline, the letterpress was superseded by industrial and digital methods of printing. Today, Morris now has over eight hundred active sides and letterpress has seen a huge resurrection of interest.

Both of these activities represent a means of reaching out and connecting to the old ways. But, rather than being a purely nostalgic exercise, their acknowledgment of a rich, deep-rooted past serves to highlight the value of continuity in building a stronger future.

Figures of Folk was exhibited from 9 February to 30 April 2015 at PARCspace, Room W224, London College of Communication, Elephant and Castle, to 30 April 2015 at PARCspace, Room W224, London College of Communication. We are looking at the subject of ‘Natural Capital’ this year and at how the Natural world still profoundly effects our daily lives. Since establishing the Museum of British Folklore, Simon has importantly reminded us of the dangers of forgetting our Historic cultures. If we become strangers to our own pasts we will be even more unprepared for the challenges of our futures.

The Morris Figures and Jig Dolls that Simon has selected here illustrate traditional customs and festivals that take place within British communities. Most contemporary festivals are rooted deep in English History and relate to the many people whose lives were dominated by the sea or the agricultural yearly cycle. These figures explain life in a community where the possession of a traditional custom usually meant a joyful dance, singing and celebration.

Each artefact carries ‘Historical’ stories which explain how the customs originated. The notes attached to each figure are fascinating examples of narrative folklore. Britain, like anywhere else has reaped its Folklore and traditions to help forge a national identity. The history of traditional customs in this country is not a simple tale of opposition and decline, on the contrary, the future of our surviving public and community events is looking positively rosy. The biggest change in calendar customs in recent years has been that the general public have also become proud of regional festivals and local traditions and view these customs as a way of celebrating distinctiveness and community tradition and cohesion.

Cities cannot be truly sustainable unless they are ‘living’ and connected with Nature. Looking more carefully at ancient festivals could be one of the best ways we have of acknowledging and celebrating the seasonal change in our modern cities. As multicultural members of huge new mega-cities, perhaps sharing and glorification of natural phenomena is one of the best ways to foster social solidarity?

We have also been delighted to create some letterpress pages with Alex Cooper to compliment the folk figures. Year 3 LCC students Oliver Zandi, Emily Todd and Vaida Klimaviciute are passionate about letterpress printing, which from its invention by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1450s, until the mid-twentieth century, was the primary method used for all printed matter. Including the Bible and the Complete Works of Shakespeare. These students are craftpeople who see value in this old technology and who want to exploit its artistic potential.

FOLK FOLK

Sarah Temple

We are delighted to welcome Simon Costin to contribute to Green Week 2015 at The London College of Communication. We are looking at the subject of ‘Natural Capital’ this year and at how the Natural world still profoundly effects our daily lives. Since establishing the Museum of British Folklore, Simon has importantly reminded us of the dangers of forgetting our Historic cultures. If we become strangers to our own pasts we will be even more unprepared for the challenges of our futures.

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Back in 2009, I decided to establish the UK’s first ever centre devoted entirely to folklore, the Museum of British Folklore. One of the central concerns has been how to best represent practices such as dance, within the context of a museum. Records of Morris dancing in England have been traced back to as early as 1448, when a note was made of seven shillings being paid to Morris dancers by the Goldsmiths Company in London. The origins of the word Morris are obscure, some thinking that the name is derived from ‘Moorish’ or ‘Morisco’ but there is no actual evidence that the dance came from the Moors. During the 15th century, a form of court dancing was known as ‘moreys daunce’ and became hugely popular. The dancers wore colourful costumes and performed solo or in a group.

By the early 16th century, Morris dancing, as we would recognise it, had become a fixture of Church festivals. As the century wore on, the Morris was mentioned by Shakespeare, “As fit as a Morris for May Day”. The Shakespearean performer William Kempe danced the Morris from London to Norwich in 1600 in what he called his ‘Nine Days Wonder’, cheered on by crowds along the way.

The dance soon spread from the court to the people and although they could not afford the more elaborate court costumes, everyday dress would be supplemented with ribbons and flowers worn in hats and of course, the all-important bells. During Oliver Cromwell’s time and particularly under the Puritans, drinking and dancing were actively suppressed and Morris died down, to be reinvigorated during the late 17th and early 18th century. A small amount of teams, such as Bampton, Headington, Aldington and Chipping Campden, can trace their origins back to a little before 1800. The two world wars saw a huge reduction in the amount of teams being able to perform. It wasn’t until the folk revival of the 1960’s and 1970’s that the dance really re-established itself and by the Millennium there were over 800 teams in the UK.

When I thought about how to represent the Morris within a museum, I knew that I wanted to involve the teams themselves in some way. I had seen some wonderful miniature representations of the Bampton Morris teams outfits, from the 1920’s, which are kept in the archive of the English Folk Dance and Song Society in London. What if I were to send out a blank cloth figure to each team for them to dress in their team kit? It would build into a folk archive made by the people who are actively participating in the dance. In 2009 I sent figures to two teams, whom I knew, Mad Jacks Morris and Hunters Moon Morris. As soon as they were returned and I saw how much care had been put into their creation, I realised that each character would carry with it, not only the history of the team, but also the pride and passion they have for the dance.

In contrast to the Morris figures, the museum has a growing collection of what are commonly known as Jig Dolls. These figures can be anything from a few centimetres in height up to forty centimetres. Usually made in wood, they differ from a traditional doll in that all of the joints are made to move. A rod extends from the back of the figure so that it can be held over a thin board, which is then sat on by the performer who strikes the board rhythmically, whilst ‘jigging’ the figure in tune with music. The figure itself almost becomes a percussion instrument when used with skill. Street entertainers have used various kinds of dancing dolls for hundreds of years. Usually homemade, there was however a company called Dover Toys, who produced a commercial version around 1900 called ‘Mr Jollyboy’.
WILD HUNT
BEDLAM MORRIS

Fabric, paper machie, metal, wood and leather.

2014.

Proof
1980's
Maker unknown.

1970's.
Wood.
Maker unknown.
MORTIMER'S
MORRIS
2014.
Fabric, glass beads, metal and leather.

JOLLY JACK TAR
1880s.
Wood, card and fabric.
Maker unknown.
FIGURES OF FOLK

FIGURES OF FOLK

will be shown in the

(Phatdon Press, 2014).

stationary  30/6/04  9:00 am  Seite 1

of

to work with student groups and to begin

room, library/quiet room and workspace.

LCC,  (W224) providing a gallery, archive

co curated by PhD candidate Noni Stacey

Britain

Taking Photos and Liberties in 70s and 80s

day

Alternative Photo Collective.  The study

world, in partnership with the London

photography techniques in a digital

Shadows

a retrospective of Martin Parr's films

Moose 2015 is the Moose Cinema, with

Workstations Files

Lowe and, in PARcSPACE,

Photographs from the 1990s by Paul

from April 2015.  Highlights include

will be at www.mooseontheloose.net,

with events taking place at the London

Moose on the Loose

subject of this new edition of Fieldstudy.

in the exhibition

Costin and the Museum of British Folklore

Dave Fawcett. We are delighted, to be

with Tom Hunter, Andrew Gaston and

worked with LCC Green Week in 2014,

of Photography & Culture

It also hosts and co-edits the

exhibitions, conferences and publications.

research, organizes seminars, symposia,

and organize, a number of UAL research

hubs including Photography and the

Contemporary Imaginary, Sexuality and

Gender and Documentary.

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Camerawork Archive).

of back issues (where

webpage and copies of back issues (where

Val Williams. All issues are now on the PARC

webpage. PARC also organizes the

their projects can also be found on the

PARC website. PARC also organizes the

War and Conflict research hub at UCC;

and PARC staff and members belong to,

organises, a number of UAL research

hubs including Photography and the

Centre's work.

established a diverse community at UCC

and across UAL and wish to share the

ethical and sustainable projects and

motivations that we have in common.

We believe that education and

practice need to evolve swiftly together

to ensure that the discipline of design

communication meets some of the

vast challenges of our age, equipping

students, teachers and professionals for

the imminent future. New approaches,

methods and tools are urgently required

as whole range of contexts. Communicators can

fundamentally challenge how, where and

what to catalyse actions which address

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