

“Experimenta Folklore”

FRANKFURTER KUNSTVEREIN

It has been fifty years since Werner Haftmann, one of Germany's most influential art historians and the curator of Documentas 1, 2, and 3, announced that modernism's formal language would completely

eclipse that of folklore. But even a superficial glance at the contemporary landscape shows how mistaken Haftmann was in his assessment. Today, folklore permeates the very center of modernism and its legacies. It is

therefore high time that a show be devoted to this subject, and Tobi Maier, currently the curator of Ludlow 38, a joint venture of the Munich Kunstverein and the Goethe-Institut, New York, finally took it on.

In no other domain has the folkloric retained as much vitality as it has in the field of music. Singing, clapping, stomping, and dancing, customary acts of celebration, today typically occur in all genres of popular music. “Experimenta Folklore” investigates the related overlapping of folk music and contemporary art: One of the boldest works on view was a two-channel video projection by Berlin-based Japanese artist Shimabuku, *Asking the Repentistas—Peneira & Sonhador—To Remix My Octopus Works*, 2006. That year Shimabuku had made a film in which he is shown in Italy catching octopuses with ceramic containers, a traditional Japanese fishing method. Invited to present it at the Bienal de São Paulo in 2006, he told the story to two Brazilian

repentistas, impromptu singers. The repentistas relayed the story in the streets, accompanied by *tamborim* (frame drums) and adding refrains such as “Shimabuku is a great man.” Shimabuku filmed the two repentistas and here showed the footage alongside his original film, interweaving Japanese and Brazilian folklore with postconceptual strategies.

In a more overtly political register, Austrians Helmut and Johanna Kandl observed that leftist activist groups have often used folkloric symbols and rituals. After an encounter with Austrian communists donning traditional national costumes, they made a video, *Goldegg*, 2005, featuring a girls' choir: The singers, dutifully squeezed into dirndls, sing “*Commandante Che Guevara*,” a propaganda song from the '70s GDR. Similar investigations were conducted by Stephen Hackett and Richard West, who compose the artist group Factotum in Belfast: They are longtime collectors of documents, photographs, and souvenirs relating to the similarly named Factotum Choir, founded as a socialist singing group in the 1950s. The choir's songs and visual presentation consist of an eclectic mix of socialist romanticism and pagan ritual, folk art and psychedelic ephemera. The documents in the display cases and on the walls provided a veritable smorgasbord that even included present-day tributes to Stalin.

The actor in the 2007 video *Home 2* by Swiss artist Olaf Breuning is daringly folklike. As a naive Westerner attending events such as ritual dances in Papua New Guinea, his credulity lands him in various absurd situations in a merciless send-up of ethnotourism. Jim Shaw's staged video inspired by Egyptian myths, *Initiation Ritual of the 360 Degrees*, 2002, is quite different. Holding instruments built by the artist in the shape of human body parts, musicians dressed in long robes march in a circle inside a former waterworks. The show also included the obvious example of Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane's *Folk Archive*, 1999–2005, represented here by photographs, a flag, and objects of popular art. Also noteworthy were the musical instruments built by Juneau/projects/, the artists Philip Duckworth and Ben Sadler from Birmingham, UK; and Honey-Suckle Company's self-playing instruments, whose contours were inspired by Kasimir Malevich's Suprematist forms. “Experimenta Folklore” might not have been the last word on the relationship between contemporary art and folklore, but one's curiosity was piqued. This

overdue look at the crossover, with its focus on music, whetted the viewer's appetite for an exhibition that would focus more specifically on the *visual* interplay between folklore and contemporary art.

—Noemi Smolik

Translated from German by Laura Hoffmann.



Johanna Kandl, *Untitled (Opium+Vitamin)*, 2002, tempera on wood, 16 x 11 3/4". From "Experimenta Folklore."



ARTFORUM

MARCH 2009