



Simon, 'Meta Folklore', 1646, photo: Jhoeko

## Bioplastic folklore for a not-so-distant future – Janek Simon at 1646

Agnieszka Wodzińska

01.05.2022

recensie

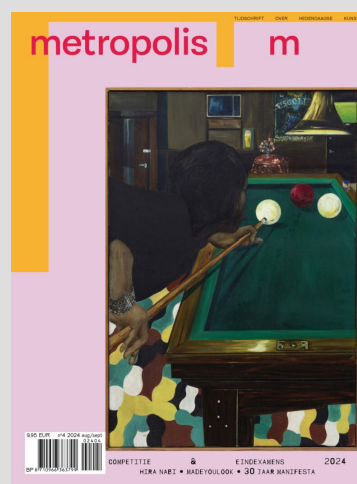
Before you are able pinpoint why a shape in Janek Simon's *Meta Folklore* feels familiar to you – maybe it resembles a statue you once saw in a museum or a toy you used to own – it shapeshifts into something else, denying you the comfort and nostalgia that comes with recognisability. Agnieszka Wodzińska watches the unstable images of Polish artist morph into one another on vertical monitors, creating a slow but consistent rhythm.

For *Meta Folklore*, his first solo exhibition in the Netherlands, Simon compiled an archive of 12,000 images of folkloric sculptures he had found on websites like eBay and Etsy. He edited each image in Photoshop and fed them all to a GAN (a Generative Adversarial Network) which created new images based on the data it received. On the screens, you see the result of this collaboration. Digital artefacts from everywhere and nowhere. It is equal parts alluring and unsettling; I watch the figures perform their never-ending transformative dance and wonder what it might bring. I am intrigued by the possibilities and unnerved by their instability.

Further down the exhibition, 3D-printed sculptures, made of a kind of bioplastic called polylactic acid, sit atop stacks of glass cubes of varying heights. The cubes are connected with corners which correspond to the sculptures in both material and colour. My eyes first travel to the sculpture which stands on the highest level of the glass structure. It appears to have its arms spread out in a welcoming gesture, as if greeting the visitor. It makes me think of an oversized bottle opener; then a decorative statue you might see on somebody's windowsill or mantle; then, a crucifix. I trace the thread of influences that might have led to the creation of this sculpture, but it is futile, like trying to get hold of a string that keeps slipping away.

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I try a different approach: a sculpture much less humanoid than the others draws my attention. It consists of four spherical shapes joined together in a vertical line by a green stabilising core, which then extends into wiggly yellow appendages on each side. The handling of shape and colour is especially playful here, reminding me of early abstract works by Hilma af Klint; biomorphic and spiritual. I try not to impose a human anatomy on the sculpture. In return, it starts to seem *more-than-human*. A multi-species and multi-national whirlwind of references, put into stasis through the process of laborious translating from 2D into 3D and then 3D-printing, which Simon achieves on a custom-built printer. The artist calls the result “cosmic” in a 1646 booklet which shows his email exchange with curator Florian Weigl. Instead of talking with the High Masters like af Klint, Simon communicates with a GAN system and programmes like ZBrush and Rhino 3D, shaping and morphing the folkloric objects from online retail websites. It is a process fit for a digitally mediated and globalised world of images, a strange seance. Simon shows you can extract something meaningful from this complex web of visuals.

It is as though Simon’s sculptures override the visual archive from which they originate. There is no “real,” only the hyper-real





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His interest in DIY-culture is apparent, from the attention he

gives in constructing and customising his technologies to the time-consuming and unpredictable artistic process: “The project starts with very geographical questions but tries to solve them using home-baked technology. It usually somehow tests boundaries of what can be done by one person with access to human scale equipment and budgets.” Simon’s cosmic sculptures are products of a very worldly, laborious process enacted by one person. This grounds the sculptures somehow. The artistic process is not automated but reciprocal and collaborative, driven by human curiosity.

Simon’s large visual archive of eBay and Etsy products is not on display in the space. This makes the works feel as though they are untraceable, built from elusive layers, kind of like heavily edited or referential memes and images that circulate online. We are all used to encountering representations of things and not the actual thing, so much we often don’t even notice it. The more I consider sourceability and traceability, the clearer it becomes that Simon’s *Meta Folklore* feels familiar because of a kind of Baudrillardian hyperreality it projects and maintains. It is as though Simon’s sculptures override the visual archive from which they originate. There is no “real,” only the hyper-real, exemplified by meta-folkloric objects which are the tangible result of the artist’s digitally mediated process.

In Simon’s journey to “create a kind of universal folklore,” there lies the desire to arrive at a meeting point of everything. But the artist recognises this is a fool’s errand: “Places are inherently different, there is no way to create a common ground, or a common denominator between them.” But it is thanks to its self-awareness and technological limitations that *Meta Folklore* facilitates an experience that is non-objective, non-universal, and rather open-ended. Simon’s sculptures vibrate with potential futures and new ways to make and relate to objects.

I am tempted to think of Simon’s works as anachronistic artefacts, one day found by extra-terrestrial visitors who may think



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collective human culture



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I am tempted to think of Simon's works as anachronistic artefacts, one day found by extra-terrestrial visitors who may think they are indeed representative of a collective human culture. These sculptures would not overtly reveal the complicated truth of the borders, geographical and other, that influence how we relate to material and digital realities. But to ground it in a more recognisable present or near future, I consider their materiality instead. Their cornstarch-based bodies can be recycled or composted. Will they become signifiers of a nationless homogeneous world culture, or will they morph into other shapes and textures? The future of all objects and materials feels heavy, as the climate crisis highlights the consequences of their problematic afterlives. But, while in the exhibition space, I feel somewhat hopeful.

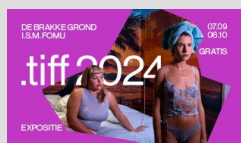
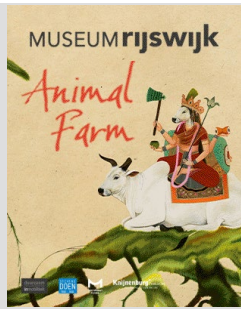
With the help of Simon's sculptures, I picture this not-so-distant

time as one in which we continue to create culturally significant images consciously and collaborate with each other and (share) technologies. The artist's inquiries into cultural geography, mediated by AI and DIY, reveal a possibility for a future that does not embrace ineffective common denominators or a complete domination of the hyper-real. Instead, it shows you can play with subjective and imperfect methodologies and seek new ways to relate to and understand image-driven hyper-realities. To do so with curiosity and openness towards meaningful exchange between familiarity and otherness is a challenge worth undertaking.

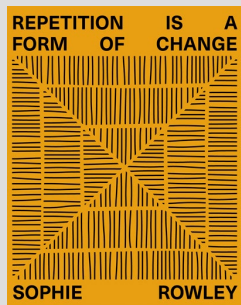
Janek Simon's exhibition *Meta Folklore* is on view at 1646 until May 15

Agnieszka Wodzińska  
is a writer and art historian



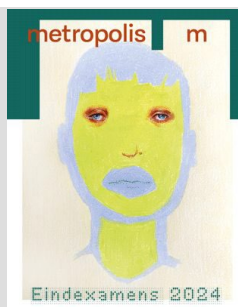


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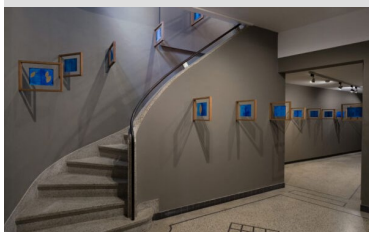
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