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Folklore, Historical and Digital
A Timecapsule of Culture and Storytelling

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Folklore, Historical and Digital
A Timecapsule of Culture and Storytelling

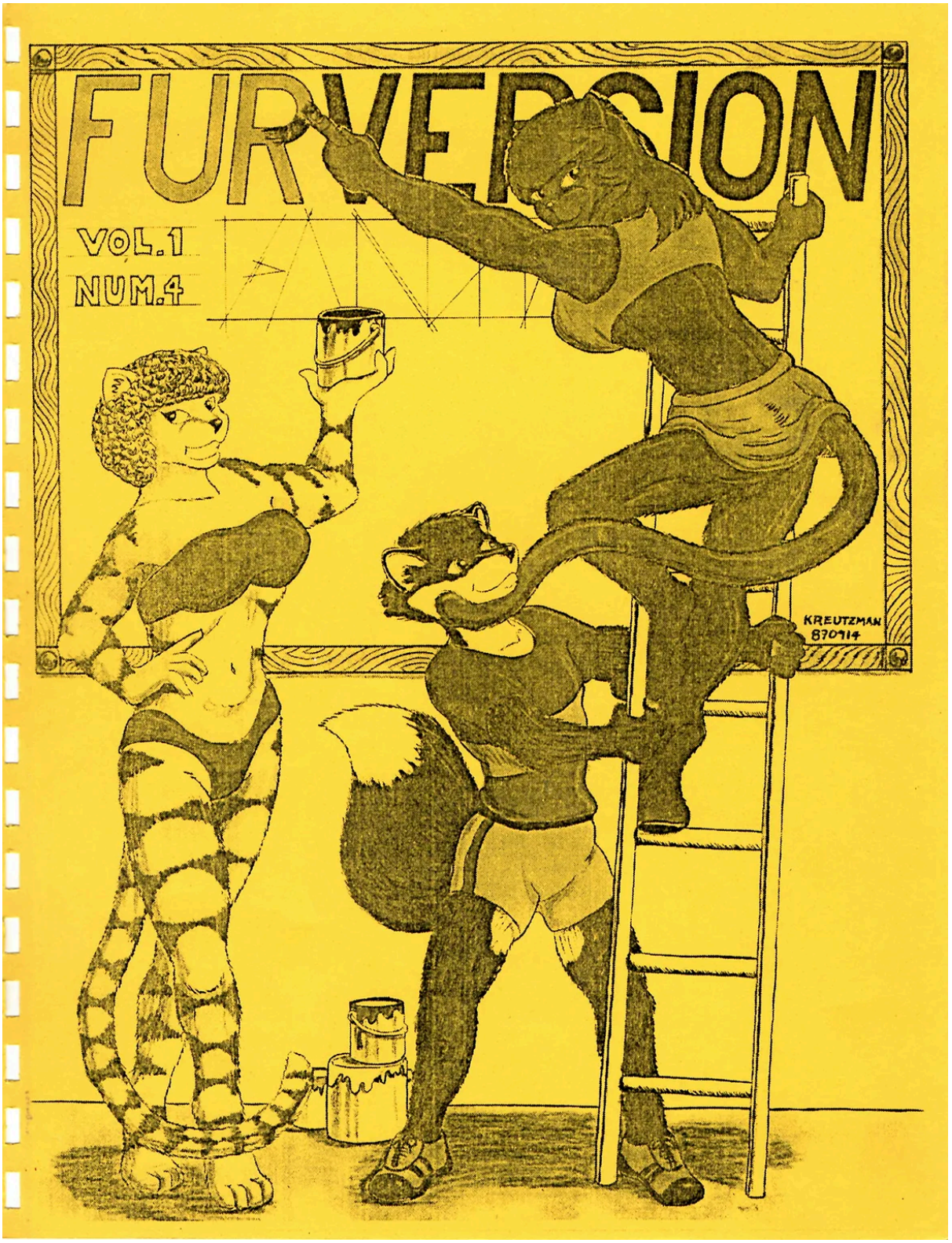
Introduction

The following essay will be an introduction into entering a more philosophical and analytical framework of thinking on the topic of folklore and culture through observations of historical and current forms of communication and storytelling. Anthropological and Folkloric studies will be sourced to inform later questions and ideas, as well as using concepts and practices from other artists such as Cory Arcangel and Olia Lialina, to break down vernacular communication and artistic expression. References to theorist Alan Dundes will be used throughout as a guide, to philosopher Plato as insight into the use of and formulation of myths, and to Judith Butler in the construction of social norms.

My own interest in folklore also encompasses fiction as seen in films and books and derives from personal encounters online with varying subcultures during the early stages of the internet, but Folkloric studies more widely discusses culture and its context in the world. The progression from cave paintings as a form of story telling to technological forms of communication online, with AI now shifting traditional folkloric beliefs, as someone who is amongst a generation being witness to this, I'm curious in how folklore shapes us and how we shape folklore. The essay will present research in chronological order from the concept of folklorism, to folkloric history, and then digital folklore, followed by a conclusion. In doing this, a proposal will be formed for further investigation.



(Photograph of Venus Pendant, n.d. Published under Archelogie.culture)



(Furversion Vol. 1, 1987. Illustrated Magazine cover)

Folklore

The concept of Folklore does not just limit itself to historical tales or myths, it permeates our present and future conversations and cultural relations through what we interact with and how we interact with something, the act of Folklore is a long standing form of sharing vital beliefs and values within a community through either written language, oral speech, material items and art (What is Folklore?, 2022). When considering how this comes into our everyday life, we practice Folklore through reading news issues, fake news, legends, holidays, internet memes, traditional practices, music and our personal relation to the supernatural. This creation of cultural Folklore would not be possible without the creation and development of identity, something that is intrinsically tied into the being of Folklore and impacts our responses to death, food and consumption (What is Folklore?, 2022).

As a culture now that is progressing in its ability to share stories through means of online social interactions and transportation, it's of high importance to note that the premise of Folklore is not stuck in historical beliefs but an ever evolving reflection of language in modern vernacular expression as well (J. Bronner, 2007).

Alan Dundes, who was a significant part of Folkloric research, distinguished Folklore as being an "autobiographical ethnography, a people's own description of themselves" (J. Bronner, 2007).

The use of language, though often overlooked, carries an unprecedented amount of weight in the formation of cultural beliefs and connection, the passed off joke and riddle trickles into our closely related built systems that rinse and repeat itself throughout generations like a xerox, Dundes had considered this weight in examining how children pass stories onto each other through a raw oral examination, stating that raw oral lore "should be performed by children for other children" (J, Bronner, 2007), with the belief that the action of Folklore

through the performance of one onto another is paramount in understanding rivalry between people, repressed emotions and how we communicate daunting topics (J. Bronner, 2007). This is observable in variations of art, writing and speech, and it captures the conception of opinion and its spread, with common folk language being seen in cultural tensions and misunderstandings, as Dundes observed in language used for African Americans and the Cold War, this being a particular point of how media coverage, riddles and jokes spread in its cultural impact (J. Bronner, 2007).

As stated before, the resulting experience of Folklore and cultural communication is prevalent in how an individual extends these beliefs in their practices and relations, the works of Francis Bacon is a notable example of Folkloric representation. Bacon's painting and link with Folklore, especially Greek mythology, within his art is not an understated or minimal part of his narrative but a large one (Tate, 2019), 'Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion' (1944) (Fig.1), can be held in conjunction with Christian symbolism and iconography as Bacon had based these distorted figures off of those who were depicted witnessing the death of Jesus (Tate, 2019), though Bacon had claimed the figures represented the avenging furies from Greek mythology, the Greek Furies punished those who disobey the natural order (Tate, 2019).

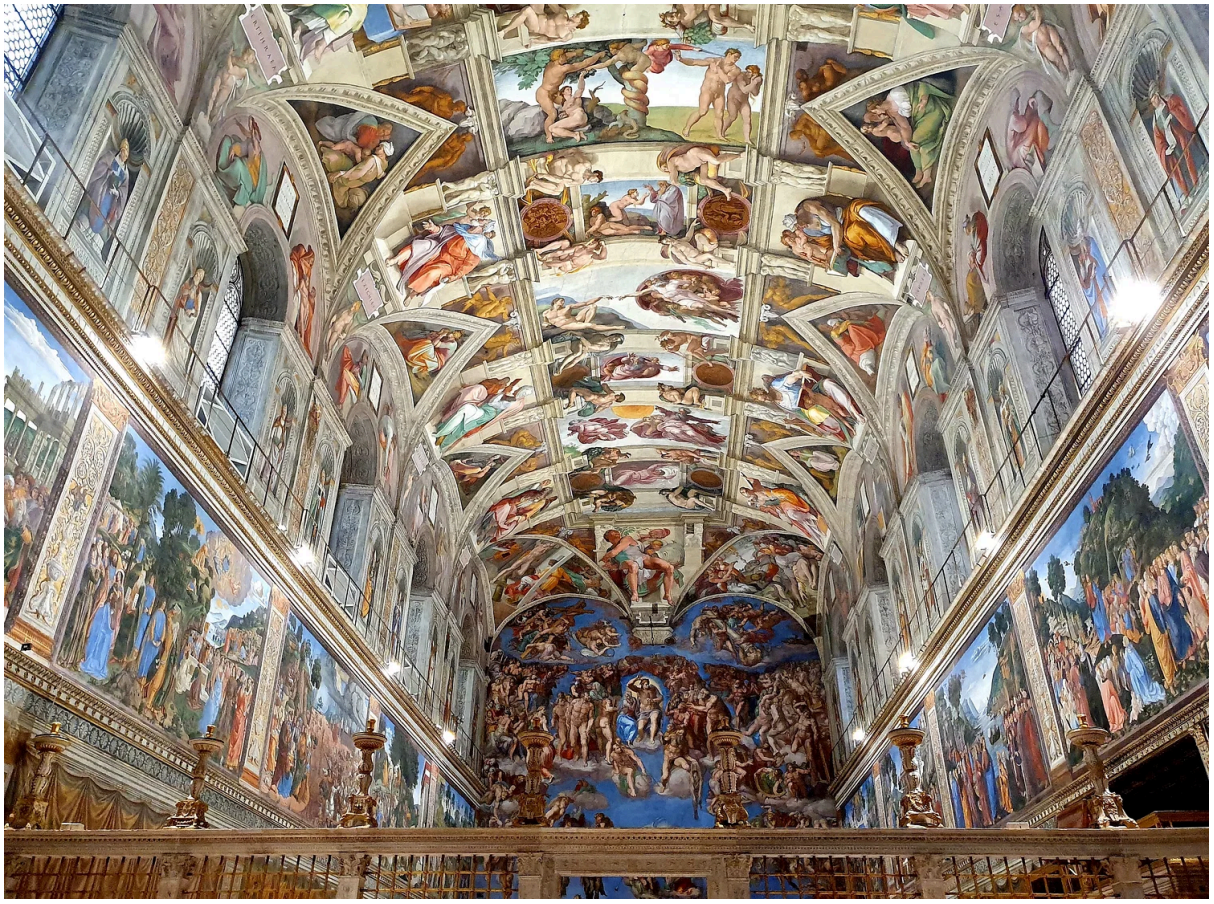
This sociology of the body and figures aligned with Bacon's processing of being in the second World War, where cultural and social beliefs informed his macabre and philosophical output (Lang, 2012), this strangeness of the human experience is regurgated through the various forms in Bacon's work and visual tales (Russell, 1971, pp.13,), which is also similar to that of Dundes reference to children telling other children folk tales, and the observations in cultural variation.



(Figure 1) Bacon, F. (1994). *Artwork Caption Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. [Oil paint on 3 boards] Copyright of *Tate*

Compared with other forms of human evidence, the visual conversation that Bacon presents aligns with the Folkloric idea Dundes expressed that “one finds a people’s own unconscious picture of themselves” (J. Bronner, 2007). This integration of Folklore within culture can pose as a conversation surrounding taboo subjects otherwise interdicted in colloquial language (J. Bronner, 2007), with the fantastical elements of Folklore we cannot detract from its truthfulness or significance as it largely offers us evidence differing from historical documentation that can represent unconscious cultural patterns (J. Bronner, 2007) .

On a grander example of Folklore in art, Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel painting (1512) (Fig. 2) is the expressed lore amongst folk that outlined the belief of the creation of humanity (Bergers, 2021, pp.63, 64), this imaginary paradise was made as a behemoth for viewers to feel their smallness amongst religion and creation, as John Berger states “The visitors in the chapel floor are like the figures who have just dropped from between the feet and out of the skirts of the Prophets and Sibyls” (Bergers, 2021, pp.63, 64).



(Figure 2. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel Fresco Painting, 1512. Copyright of Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike., 2020)

Historical

With slight divergence from the concept of Folklore, there cannot be a disregard of historical forms of storytelling in order to understand our contemporary modes of conversing, with relation to the development of human language and what it means to share language with one another as discussed in the last section, we can think about the early Homo Sapiens rise in artistic inventions correlating to lore. As humans became more enriched with their ability to formulate circles within local proximity, inventions were notably being made outside of speech and through more physical mediums like boats and bows and arrows, with a very notable figure dating from thirty two thousand years ago known as the ‘Stadel Lion man’ (fig 3) (Harari, 2015, pp.25). The Stadel Lion man appears to be a carved figure with a cross between human body and lion head, with this being one of the first examples of art, it is also an example of our first interactions with religion and the human minds capability of imagining non existent things (Harari, 2015, pp.25), which brings the emergence of gossip as it coincides heavily with religion, myths and Folklore.

As Folklore is a necessity for humans, so is our need to gossip, without our ability to gossip and immerse ourselves and our folks in stories, we would not have been able to exist within what has been built now (Harari, 2015, pp.27).

What can be a guiding example, and also a personal point of interest in this topic, is the prehistoric paintings of the Chauvet cave (Fig. 4). These Paleolithic drawings dating back approximately thirty thousand years ago established a new found knowledge of the early human relations through visual studies (Cave of Forgotten Dreams, 2010), we know that during the humans time spent in this cave, there were not only remembered observations of wild animal going across the wall, but also an imagined deity (a lower part of a woman's body crossed with an animal head) and shrine of a bear's skull (Chauvet: Humanity’s First Great Masterpiece, 2026) (fig. 5). Whilst this slightly varies from gossip, it’s a germane premise for folklorism and its history, the Chaveut cave paintings were a product of early

Homo Sapiens expressing beliefs attached to the human figure and animals through the act of drawing, inherently there's a collective fantasy being displayed through its symbolism (Chauvet: Humanity's First Great Masterpiece, 2026)(J. Bronner, 2007), Alan Dundes believed symbolism to be a delineating part of internal and collective thoughts within Folkloric expressions, where gossip comes into play is integral to the act of sharing stories to one another concerning that of real people as well (J. Bronner, 2007). When we think back to Ancient Greece and its myths, once known as "muthos", these stories were seen as true, whereas now myth is something to be skeptical of and debunked, myth was also historically used as a guiding point in philosophical enquiries (Partenie, 2018). Philosopher Plato often used stories to further educate his followers, it is unknown to what extent the myths are true or false but the use of participants within the dialogue carried events outside of the human experience (Partenie, 2018), and with this fantastical take on philosophy that was radical to the society of Plato's era, Plato articulated a vision that further placed an emphasis on the use of Folklore to garner efficient belief from a wider circle of people (Partenie, 2018).
The Chauvet cave paintings were and are a more minimal notion of Plato's myths, within the bounds of the cave a system of belief extended itself onto the walls as perhaps a ritualistic practice in relation to religion and spirituality (Cave of Forgotten Dreams, 2010). Where Plato used dialogue as a form of engagement, the artists of Chauvet cave, as we can observe, used much of their material language like fire and haematite (Cave of Forgotten Dreams, 2010) (archeologie.culture.gouv.fr, n.d.) as a way of bonding. This act of divulging in more fantastical stories placed a significance on communal activities such as sharing around a fire, which to many holds a traditional stance in Folklore but these communal acts elongate itself into lesser known ways that are engaged with in modern society (J. Bronner, 2007).



(figure 3. Stadel Lion Man Figure, Mammoth Ivory Carving. HunebedNieuwscafe photograph, 2020)



(*Figure 4*. Lion Panel Drawing in Chauvet Cave. Ministry of Culture, n.d.)



(*Figure 5*. Photograph of Bear Skull in Chauvet Skull Chamber. From Archelogie.culture, n.d. Copyright of Ministry of Culture 2026)

Digital

In the traditional sense of Folklore being practiced through a gathering around the fire, we can now consider its modern implications in how Folklore reflects cultures in its digital stages of existence, with the invention of global communication and storytelling through gathering around the television as a form of immersion, this is different to what we know from our ancestors practice of cave painting, and within recent years this collective form of sharing stories has landed humans on an even more substantial scale with the global access of the internet.

Between the early expressions of Folklore to modern technological outputs, cognitive similarities are still prevalent and differences have primarily amounted in the materials at

hand (Harari, 2015, pp.41), we continue to imagine realities which makes for diverse behavioural patterns (Harari, 2015, pp.41), that online communities have expanded the amount of cultures one can become involved with.

When we think about Folklore in a digital context, the presence of historical legends, gods, spirits, myths, etc, can lead us into thinking about contemporary Folk communities that draw from these innate human imaginations (Thurston Howl, 2015, pp.9). An example of a modern subculture is the Furry community, who identify themselves as a Folk group heavily involved within the arts and anthropomorphic culture that can be associated with that of Egyptian deities (Thurston Howl, 2015, pp.5). The consideration of such a subculture invokes a larger conversation around internet lore, it is not a detraction from the important topic of Folklorism but an unequivocal factor of our modern experience within shared spaces. Furries play on the stereotypes of Folktales, such as the fox being more cunning, and bears having a more masculine gender role (Thurston Howl, 2015, pp.71), this being reminiscent of Judith Butler's philosophy of gender, that it's more so a cultural construction of performance rather than a set biological fact (Kakoliris, 2025). It is the regular practice of the expectation of gender that solidifies and constitutes itself within a culture, this could not be without the use of language and social rituals as gender is not an inherent trait but an enforced theme (Kakoliris, 2025).

Reflecting back on older stories entailing male and female characters like Hansel and Gretel (1812), and even the concept of Adam and Eve, both portraying particular roles of gender norms to articulate held values and beliefs of that era (J. Bronner, 2007), fantastical stories are now more readily lived in with the ability of morphing oneself through the use of videogames and digital identity (Boellstorff, 2008, pp.24).

Not only this, internet dialect takes on a much more complex experience of involving oneself within lore, the commonly seen latrinalia (a term used in describing graffiti seen within bathrooms (Internet Archive 2023), has been correlated to bloggers, e-mails and postal writing due to its act of writing that merits a response (Blank, 2009, pp.56).

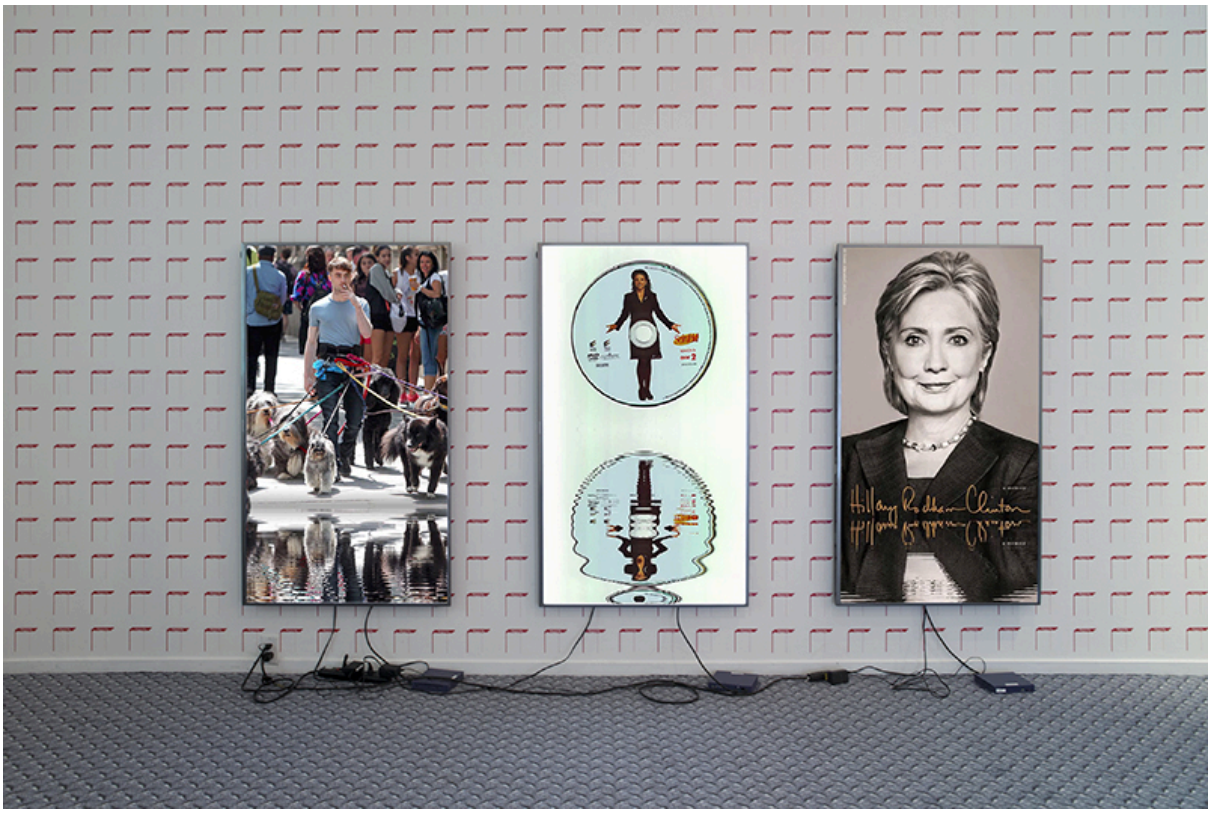
Dundes examined latrinalia as being a release from the work day restraint with its uncensored language, comparable to that of computer communication (Blank, 2009, pp.58, 59). Two people who can better our understanding of online expression are Net artists Olia Lialina and Cory Arcangel, who engage with digital mediums to inform their creative practice around iconographical and online relationships, with both being fascinated by vernacular consumer culture (Eivind Rossaak, 2026, pp.8).

Arcangel's work notably comprises recycled images that are reprised suitably for his subjects, to then presenting games like tetris and Mario, there is a regurgitation of culture (Eivind Rossaak, 2026, pp.8,9)(fig. 6), while Lialina's work focuses on the user's contribution in shaping internet culture and folklore through the means of online posts and forums typically associated with the older vernacular web (Buerger et al., 2009, pp.19) (fig. 7). Lialina interrogates language in the dimension of the net, claiming "If something is in the net, it should speak in net.language" (NET ART ANTHOLOGY: My Boyfriend Came Back From the War, 2016), this embodies much of her interest in the relationship between human and technological memory (NET ART ANTHOLOGY: My Boyfriend Came Back From the War, 2016). Both Lialina and Arcangel literally represent the vernacular web in its usage of language and imagery, where traditional Folklore meets us at a new form of processing and output (Buerger et al., 2009, pp.28)(Eivind Rossaak, 2026, pp.27).

"The personal computer must be regarded as a medium with a cultural history shaped more by its users and less by its inventors" (Buerger et al., 2009, pp.10) .

But now, as humans still traverse net culture, a third layer of Artificial Intelligence projects itself amongst the landscape. AI is massively taking routes in circulating stories and shifting the political context of historical and recent events, such an example is deepfakes, namely its usage against female politicians (Bates, 2025, pp.15). Thinking back to Lialina and Arcangel who demonstrate the users output of net language and expression, AI allows for

part human and part artificial outputs to be made, for better or for worse. At a faster rate the usage of memes within AI is being used to inform communities outside of the internet (Bates, 2025, pp.11) as well as within the internet. We can compare earlier vernacular language, like with the Budd Dwyer case and its shared memes during the early nineties (Blank, 2009, pp.45) to that of the more visual imagery formed with AI by a human (Bates, 2025, pp.17). There have not been many writings on the implications of AI on Folklore, but there is undoubtedly an impact taking shape in its usage of how we communicate opinions and humour as its accessibility reaches a global scale.



(*figure 6* Photograph of Cory Arcangel's Asymmetrical Response exhibition. Copyright of Arcangel, 2016)


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Back Forward Home Reload Images Open Print Find Stop
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(*Figure 7*. Photograph of ‘My Boyfriend Came Back from the War’ by Olia Lialina. Copyright of Rhizome 1996)

Conclusion

This essay has only briefly scraped the myriad of questions and topics that go over the meaning of Folklore in its existence as a whole, with everything that has been presented correlating to myself and my practice going forward. With how Folklore has culminated within varying cultures, I question where my footing is amongst my conscious awareness of my local Folklore and my long term engagement with digital Folklore, from how I extend myself into more traditional mediums as the painters of Chauvet cave once did, to technologically advanced modes of addressing ideas and beliefs online, how, with the research gathered, do I further investigate and apply this in a more personal manner. With more of an inclination towards philosophy and curiosity surrounding the research discussed, a question I’ll be proposing for later cultivation within personal usage and studies is, with a focus on a Folkloric praxis, how is culture and language manifesting itself in the relations between human and technology across a historical and modern context.

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