The commons defines the natural capital that we all share: land, air and water. It is a social system that cares for and preserves these resources. When they are made inaccessible, the effects can be devastating.
Six artists respond to the commons at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading, with a focus on the challenges we face today and how these link to complex histories of ownership and land enclosure.

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THE MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE

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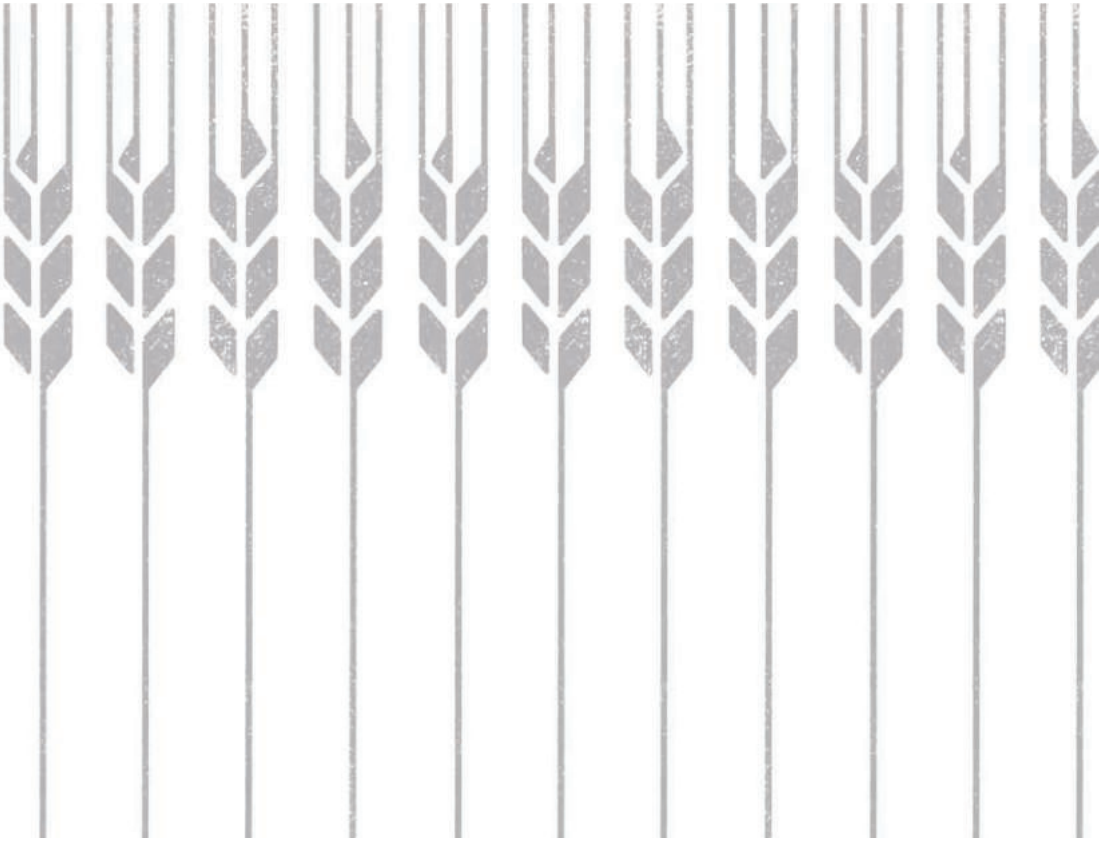
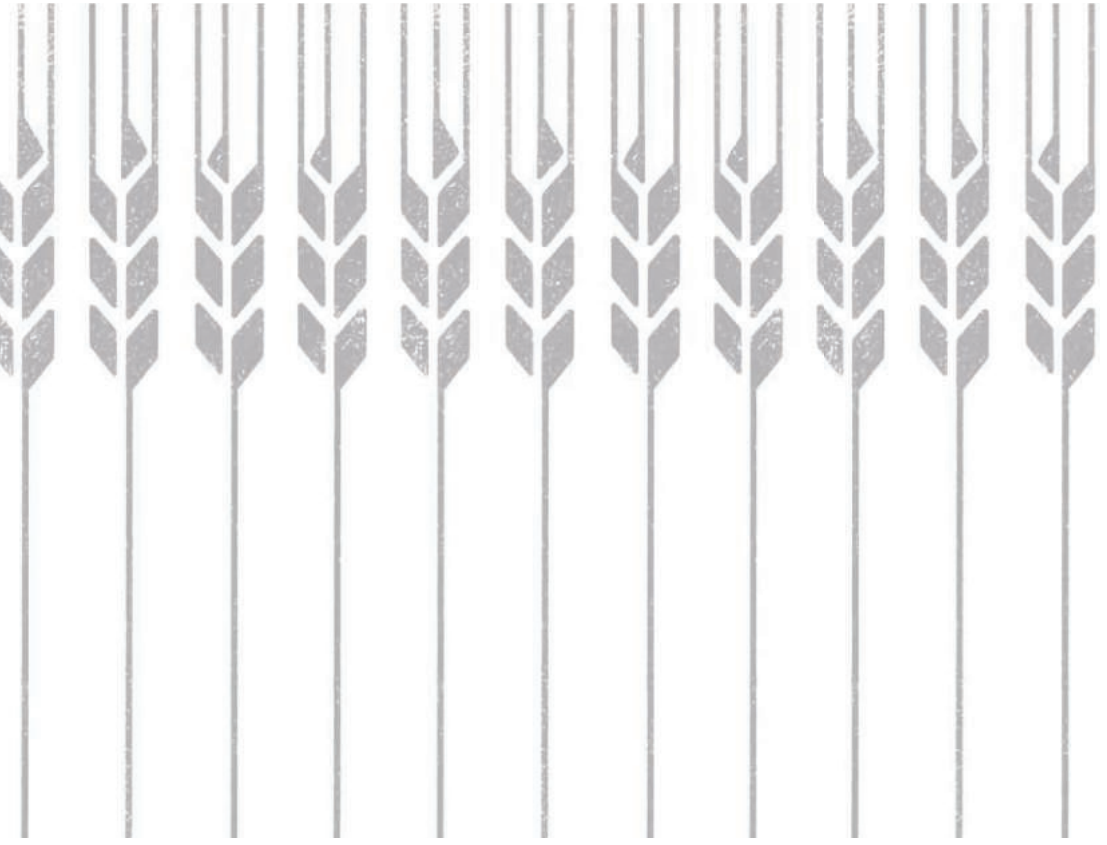
THE COMMONS

THE

COMMONS

RE-ENCHANTING THE WORLD






THEY SEW
FLAGS
STITCH
TRADES HALL COUNCIL
MELBOURNE

PUBLISHED TO ACCOMPANY
THE EXHIBITION AND PROJECT

THE

COMMONS

RE-ENCHANTING THE WORLD

AT THE MERL
JANUARY 2020 - APRIL 2022

CURATED BY
CATHERINE MORLAND AND
AMANDA COUCH

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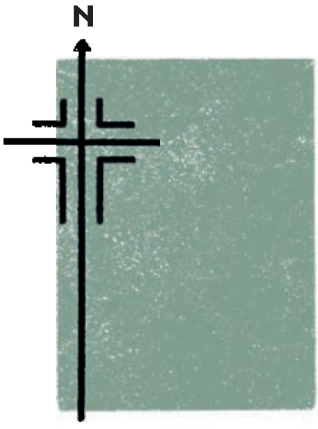
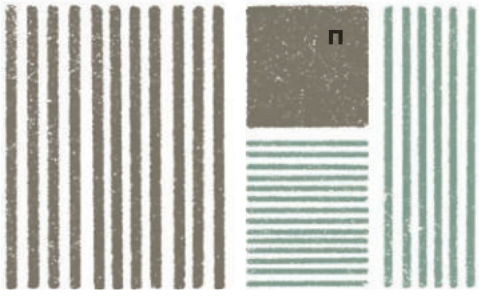


"For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one." (Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, p. 31)

"To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst, the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable

"WE SHARE THIS PLANET, OUR HOME, WITH MILLIONS OF SPECIES. JUSTICE AND



"I refer to our need for the sun, the wind, the sky, the need for touching, smelling, sleeping, making love, and being in the open air, instead of being surrounded by closed walls (keeping children enclosed within four walls is still one of the main challenges that teachers encounter in many parts of the world). Insistence on the discursive

SUSTAINABILITY BOTH DEMAND

THAT WE DO NOT USE MORE RESOURCES THAN WE NEED."

construction of the body has made us lose sight of this reality." (Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, p. 190)

from relations to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, rather than as a noun, a substantive." (Peter Linebaugh, The Magna Carta Manifesto, p. 279)

The World

"Soil, not oil, holds the future for humanity." (Vandana Shiva)

Introduction
by Catherine Morland, co-curator

I was far away from home in Turkana County, the vast drylands of northern Kenya, when ideas started to germinate in my mind about a commons project. I was staying in Nairobi, making work, visiting prehistoric sights, doing a residency, planning an exhibition and getting a sense of my connection to this country. Britain's bloody colonial history cast a long shadow, but instead I was drawn further back in time towards Kenya's ancient past and its entwined connection with mine. Turkana is known as the cradle of mankind because of the abundance of fossil deposits found here. I had come to visit the Turkana Basin Institute (TBI), a hard-to-access research centre in the middle of the desert where anthropologists and palaeontologists gather from all over the world to dig up the remains of our ancestors as well as their fellow fauna and flora. The landscape around the TBI was unlike anywhere I had ever been, the fossil badlands and harsh blue skies stretching for miles with little interruption other than acacia trees and vast termite mounds. There were so many stories to tell here about our evolution, origins and ancestors, and as a new mother I was sucked in. This fossil-rich desert was also home to nomadic pastoralists, the Turkana, who have been living on this communal land for over 200 years. On the way back from the TBI I stopped at a settlement and was shown round by a group of women. It was while I was there observing their labour and domestic activities, part of a very specialised type of subsistence living, that I had an understanding of commoning as a way of life.

So, we all know of the commons. It's our shared natural resources: air, land and water. All the things we have taken for granted. All the things that get taken away from us without us realising. All the things that we notice much more when we no longer have them. But for many, including peasants during the 18th century whose access to common land was taken away, and indigenous people all over the world, the commons is more than a

resource. It represents the relationship between these vital natural resources and the humans and non-humans who use it. It is also a social system and a social space for knowledge sharing, food gathering and medicine exchange, for sustaining health and wellbeing and for sharing labour – and crucially, an intergenerational space for negotiation and discussion between genders. This space requires maintenance in the form of care, customs and memories, discussions and songs, things that should be taught and renewed continuously.

The Turkana pastoralists are continually on the move with their herds to find good pasture. The girls and women are responsible for constructing and repairing their temporary living units made from plant materials growing nearby. They also do the cooking, gathering and fetching of drinking water. This way of life requires extensive social networks and ancient knowledge of weather patterns, as well as a deep understanding of different species of animal and vegetation. They work in common with their more-than-human neighbours; animals, plants, water, land and wind, diligently caring for their cattle, giving names to them and singing to them. The use of plant materials including acacia and doum palm to build their homes was the beginning of my learning about basketry and weaving. Handmade cordage was being used for holding, carrying, storing and tying. Everything was well crafted but utilitarian and sustainable.

The details of this collective experience stayed with me on my return to the UK, and, although I was under no illusions about the precariousness of this type of nomadic existence, I started to think about how we define domestic labour and how long the current tropes have been in place. Back home, as well as being a new mother, I would be looking after elderly parents and starting to get my art practice up and running again. I found myself living a life of unremitting, unremunerated labour. Politically speaking, making art, childcare, caring for one's parents and housework can be seen in a similar way: they are not economically valued and seem to be set outside the social framework of the labour economy. I wanted to find out where this inequality stemmed from.

Silvia Federici in *Caliban and the Witch* refers to this type of work as reproductive labour. Essentially this is the emotional and physical care of a household from cradle to grave. "Federici observes the production of the commons in the everyday – washing, mopping, reassuring, dusting, dressing, feeding children,

having children and caring for the sick and the elderly."[1] She connects the roots of inequality concerning this kind of labour back to land ownership and the enclosures in 18th-century Europe, when common land was taken away from the peasants in the name of improving agriculture and liberating peasants. According to Federici, "It was not the workers – male or female – who were liberated by land privatization. What was 'liberated' was capital, as the land was now 'free' to function as a means of accumulation and exploitation, rather than as a means of subsistence."[2]

This separation of the worker from the land and the beginning of the money economy was the advent of industrialisation, the Empire and capitalist accumulation, and the country needed a labour force. Taking away access to common land from a population who relied upon it for their subsistence was one way of ensuring this. Work became gendered, with men making up the new workforce while reproductive labour became solely women's work, unpaid and as such denigrated.

The concept of the commons is discussed as much by its detractors as by its advocates, thanks largely to an infamous essay written by Garrett Hardin in 1968. In 'The Tragedy of the Commons', Hardin's belief that overuse of common lands leads to exploitation has led to policies of land grabbing and privatisation all over the world. Federici refers to these as the new enclosures, particularly in Africa. "On most of the African continent communal claims to the land are still strong, for colonial domination failed to destroy pre-existing communal relations, beginning with people's relation to the land."[3] The Turkana in Kenya who recognise these ancient, communal rights to their land have been marginalised, viewed as backward, unproductive and economically unviable by consecutive colonial and post-independence governments. Instead of the initiatives intended to transition the Turkana away from pastoralism to more sedentary livelihoods and wage labour, and thus progress to "modernity", perhaps "modernity" could look towards understanding and enabling pastoralism and other indigenous knowledge to inform new approaches to the modern commons?

The enclosures and the impact this had on English rural life became the starting point for this project and our collaboration with The Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL). I was visiting the museum on the recommendation of my basketry teacher to check out their collection of basketwork, but in the back of my mind

I was on the lookout for a home for this project. The museum was a perfect match. The collection is immaculately curated, explaining the countryside and its heritage for a wide, not just rural, audience. The exhibits and resources are full of references and stories, many relating to the tide of social reform that followed the enclosures concerning land ownership, gender equality, the right to vote, reproductive labour, the destruction of communal life, the beginning of allotments, the start of the waged economy, and the end of subsistence living. All these things that had a profound effect on the course of our global history were at the root of our discussions. The commons project had found its host. The journey had begun.

The works in this exhibition present five different approaches to the commons. Amanda Couch refers to the more-than-human commons and our interconnectedness with plants through her growing and foraging practices, while Sigrid Holmwood comments on the colonial commons through her work with dye plants. Kelechi Anucha and Carl Gent together work with folk songs and the immaterial commons, and my work connects to the feminist commons by foregrounding the work of women who suffer most from land enclosures. Sam Wallman, who is based in Australia, is involved in organising labour for the common good.

As we began as a group to shift our thinking from commons as a resource towards commoning as a set of practices to adhere to, to enable a better world, we began to realise how important it is to understand the social system that cares and preserves them. This relationship we have with our emerging commons is not static – it needs to be constantly revived and reimagined to face the ecological and social challenges that we are currently facing. The work is ongoing, and as the group disperses together with all the creative commoners we have gathered along the way, we hope that with individual acts as well as collective practices we can continue our journey forward, and that this project is just the beginning.

Throughout the early years of this project, I was hosting "Workaways" at home. Workaway is an international online platform where volunteers agree to work for a set number of hours per day in exchange for bed and board and the welcome of a family home. Every month, a new young school leaver from as far away as Italy, France or Spain would arrive to

stay, and between us we would navigate the labour required to look after our small household for four weeks at a time: cooking, cleaning, childcare, gardening, shopping, babysitting, chatting, gossip and advice-giving. No money changed hands, there was no contract, and the arrangement could be ended at any time. Despite my initial misgivings, it was a big success for more than two years, before Covid struck.

All the while our future project at The MERL was taking shape. The culmination was an exhibition and programme of events spread out over a year, but we also began to see the project as a call to action, a reflection on how we could revive the commons and bring the acts of commoning into our lives. Then I realised I had been doing just that for years, thanks to Workaway: sharing resources in a shared space guided by a moral economy. My own everyday commons.

Written on International Women's Day 2022

[1] Peter Linebaugh in the foreword to Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, 2019, p. xiii.

[2] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia, 2004, p. 75.

[3] Federici, *Re-enchanting the World*, op. cit., p. 35.

Introduction
by Amanda Couch, co-curator

When Catherine Morland invited me to co-curate *The Commons* project with her in November 2017, she had already gathered some of our artist commoners, Carl Gent and Sigrid Holmwood, and we set about reading Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* together. At the start, my knowledge of the enclosure of the commons was by way of GSCE History, where I'd learnt about the agricultural revolution: the shift from the open-field system coupled with the elimination of hard labour through mechanisation, which I remember was conveyed, as part of an inevitable momentum towards "progress". There was certainly no mention of land theft, internal colonisation of European peasants, or that these policies correlated with events across the globe and the enslavement of peoples in Africa and the Americas.

I remember feeling a strong connection to the stories that I was encountering, recognising that the peasant people would have been my ancestors. Also pertinent was that my family and I lived just a few miles away from where the Speenhamland system of public assistance or "poor relief" was conceived, a policy that was then rolled out across the south of England. The need for such economic support was a direct result of enclosure, the systemic obliteration of commoners' rites and the destruction of centuries of subsistence living – and, as Federici wrote, "recognition of the *unsustainability* of a capitalist system ruling exclusively by means of hunger and terror".[1] Of course, I had little awareness whilst learning about the fates of my rural relatives that I was being schooled in a system that was part of a neoliberal capitalist machine to produce wage slaves. Later, becoming an artist, I naively believed, would be a kind of resistance, one way to contest being part of the wage economy.

After further reading of Federici, I quickly associated *Extispicy in the Everyday* – the project I was working on that aimed to collapse human-environment boundaries

by way of the gut – with the oppression and experience of women, specifically those described as "witches". "We have to think of enclosures as a broader phenomenon than simply fencing off land," Federici states. "We must think of the enclosure of knowledge, of our bodies, and the relationship to other people and nature [...] a world of social/cultural practices and beliefs [...] was wiped out."[2]

Contemplating how our bodies are host to more cells that are non-human than human – our gut microbiome, for example – is a stark reminder, especially when things go wrong with our digestion, that we are not separate from nature, but are enmeshed with what Professor Patrick Bresnihan terms "the more-than-human commons". He writes that the commons:

Points [...] to a messier, entangled world as starting point: not simply 'accessible' to technical knowledge but unfolding, and thus changing, through practical engagements that tie humans and non-humans together (and thus shapes them) in different ways.[3]

As the Covid-19 pandemic developed, this entangling of human and more-than-human commons became increasingly apparent for me, shifting my understanding of commons from being a "thing", a "noun", to commons as "an activity", as Peter Linebaugh writes. As the virus spread, it was clear how commons embodied our porousness as organisms, "express[ing] relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature".[4] Commons and commoning became part of common parlance across society, playing out with touch, and breath, through the wearing of facemasks to protect others, for example, and solidarity movements – such as the collective actions of shopping and delivering meals to elderly and clinically vulnerable neighbours – all of which embodied our interdependence and mutual coexistence.

It was the acts of enclosure of the physical commons that also created a disconnect of knowledge, where people became doubly impoverished. Our *Commons* project seeks to reclaim, rediscover and redistribute some of that missing knowledge wealth, rebuilding an appreciation for lost skills, methods and understanding, and acknowledge the expertise stripped from the marginalised that enabled people to survive and thrive in partnership with nature. Through our activities, guided by the artists in their individual ways, we hope the project cross-pollinates through the centuries and with the landscape around us: for example, in

the way that Sigrid Holmwood unearths the secrets of dye recipes hidden within plants after years of colonisation; Kelechi Anucha and Carl Gent's song practices that bring back moments of sociality and collective reproduction lost in the process of social enclosure; Catherine Morland's basketry and cordage tethering and binding generations with one another; and my actions to reclaim relationships with the land and the more-than-human through growing plants and foraging food.

Along the way we gathered more commoners to collaborate and be in dialogue with, to remake the commons. Sam Wallman, Josefin Vargö, Kristen Fraser, Ollie Douglas, Danielle Eade, Angela Brown, Sharon Davey, Tom Woodhouse, and Fong Scott, plus many others at The MERL, Sara Trillo, Bethan Amey, participants in our workshops and at our feasts, volunteer gardeners and the Becoming with Wheat Companions, Ann Bodkin and Reading Grow Beer hops growers, the Mills Archive, bakers, Sophie Haworth and Nathan Crawley Lyons at RISE Bakehouse, Company Drinks, and our contributors to our concluding symposium, JC Niala, Carmen Wong, Sheila Ghelani, Nick Hayes, Michael Smythe, Karl Fitzgerald, plus many more. It is through these conversations, events, the interventions in the galleries, gardening, workshops and this publication that we are commoning, making and remaking the commons by negotiating and developing ways of sociability to share, disseminate and make new knowledge.

I am writing this reflection fresh and transformed from the picket lines, after a period of strikes by my union, University College Union (UCU). And I can report that here, too, the commons is alive and vibrant. Experiencing a strong bond to my fellow workers, I feel ever more emboldened with what I have learnt over the course of this project, assured that "commons exists any place, any time; it is the basis of collective freedom from exploitative labour and exclusive structures of ownership".[5]

In solidarity

[1] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation, Autonomedia*, 2004, p. 84.

[2] Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, PM Press, 2018, p. 21.

[3] Patrick Bresnihan, 'The More-than-Human Commons: From Commons to Commoning', 2015, https://www.academia.edu/11778318/The_More-than-Human_Commons_From_Commons_to_Commoning [accessed 6 March 2022], p. 13.

[4] Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto*, University of California Press, 2008, p. 279.

[5] Patrick Bresnihan and Naomi Millner, 'Crafting the Commons: Between Particular Acts and Universal Claims', in *We are Commoners: Creative Acts of Commoning*, Craftspace, 2021, p. 44.

Imagining The Commons: A Tour of The MERL
by Ollie Douglas, curator of MERL Collections

I want you to imagine that you are in a museum. This is not just any museum but an agricultural museum, a craft museum, and a museum telling a story of social and cultural history. It is a museum that hosts collections, supports concepts, and facilitates conversations concerning our relationship with landscapes, materials, food and the natural world. Indeed, I want you to imagine that you are here with me, a curator, in The Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL). This is a museum at the heart of an urban community that also forms part of a scholarly environment. It holds collections that connect it to the heritage sector, and it benefits from support from arts and cultural organisations. It is a venue, an institution and a community in its own right, and tries hard to include different stakeholders in its work. In short, ideas of community, communication and of a common inheritance lie at the core of what The MERL is, and what it aspires to be.

As well as a place for conventional engagements with rural heritage – label browsing, catalogue searching, archive trawling, reading and research – you are entering a space that offers opportunities for reflection and dialogue around contemporary challenges. The MERL welcomes craftspeople and creative practitioners, poets and performers, musicians and makers, scholars and scientists. It is a place where we aim to think in open and imaginative ways about our shared pasts and how these might inform our lives today. It is in this spirit that we welcome *The Commons* team, helping to plant their stories and scatter their ideas amongst the grounds, artefacts, graphics and narratives of our displays.

This process begins outside. One sunny day, as the nation emerges from lockdown, a very small community of three comes together in The MERL garden, moving special raised beds into place, and allowing Amanda Couch space to broadcast seeds into locally sourced, sustainable compost. Until this moment

the project remains as conceptual and intangible as the discourse that inspired it. In conversation as we work, we learn that the commons has its roots in the activism of social thinker Silvia Federici, leading us to reflect on the value of women's work, the accumulation of material wealth and the need for communal engagement. In some senses the project remains abstract; a theoretical digression inviting action out there in the world. As seeds are sown the task begins to grow and, as it spreads organically through the events and galleries of The MERL, we unearth a range of dormant ideas concealed within the collections. Aspects of the outside environment – raw, uncatalogued, unframed and real – are invited inside. So let us imagine that we too are going inside.

Entering the first of our galleries, where fixed exhibits tell the story of a managed human landscape, a temporary panel invites visitors to be part of the team's process of re-enchantment with the world and the shared resources it affords. Much like the reworked rural landscapes these displays explore, this text helps us understand that our world is a palimpsest, constantly overwritten with new ways of understanding, working and living. Here human impacts and exploitations seem paramount, and the writings of Donna Haraway – which characterise the period we are living through as Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene and Chthulucene – feel alarmingly pertinent. So, as we move inside and start to explore, let us think about the ways in which these challenging ideas might mark, underline, overwrite, change or otherwise alter the stories we already compose about the rural.

In the next gallery, objects chart the seasonal story of a *Year on the Farm*. Interspersed with outmoded technologies that silently explore unchanging elements of agricultural process, a series of three sonic sculptures by Kelechi Anucha and Carl Gent distract from the flow. In turn, each piece delivers a subtle layer of audio that hints at a different experience. A discarded Morris dancer's stick rests against a farm wagon, its alcopop jingles ringing to the sound of a hymn-turned-folksong. A mannequin torso adorned with straw and loom-band bracelets sings the regretful lament of a colonial settler pining for a nostalgic past. And a piece of bridal lace daubed with pitch sings out a departing whaler's words to their lover. Here The MERL shares a single evocative object alongside – a bottle filled with salt and rags, of a kind given to a newly married bride as a sign that she would be

"worth her salt", that she would prove useful. These are human stories. Stories that speak to the Anthropocene and to the power and impact that people have in the world. In harmony with these sounds, sculptures and farm tools we reflect on how we can prove useful – how we can make a difference.

We round a corner into *Town and Country*, where amongst things that speak to the rural/urban divide, we see the prominent graphics of a banner designed by cartoonist and activist Sam Wallman. This boldly states the project's aim to "Reclaim the Commons". The loss of common land to enclosure forms a cruel backdrop to The MERL's exhibits. In this gallery alone, displays hint at how labour was dragged out of the fields – through revolution, mechanisation, and reform – and moulded into a factory workforce. A steam engine alongside production line images hints at machines built for land grab in England and in Empire. Allotment artefacts stand testament to socialist campaigns for a few square yards of soil. And the narrative flow culminates with a rumination on popular culture, where histories of enclosure have been routinely excluded, expunged or forgotten; merged into a Capitalocene, where material wealth dominates. In a world of fashion wellies, wax jackets and "Chelsea tractors", our collective right to access and be part of the rural is crying out for reclamation, and a different idea of cultural capital.

The idea of a rural world constructed through cultural forces not entirely within our control comes again to the fore in the next gallery we enter, *Making Rural England*. Alongside stories of craft, marginalised communities and the romantic drivers of landscape design, this space also explores domesticity. A farmhouse kitchen interior contrasts with a bare and cramped interpretation of a labourer's home. In these socially stratified set-pieces we find woven cordage artworks by Catherine Morland. A mixture of found and reclaimed materials recycles this gallery into a commentary on making; things once discarded are welcomed home through creative transformation. Traditional gender roles feel prominent in this space, which unpicks familial threads and reveals how farm work can be shared by men and women alike. This recalls Federici's foundational role in the Wages for Housework movement, and reminds us that farming is much more than simply fieldwork. Gender, femininity and intergenerational skills are foregrounded by works including one part made by Morland's own daughter. The

next generation lies at the heart of stories of hope and change.

Into the *Forces for Change* gallery and we are welcomed by footage of Amanda Couch performing agricultural tasks: preparing soil and sowing spelt, emmer and einkorn wheat. An apron and special sowing and harvesting masks are juxtaposed with the 19th-century story of the Swing Riots – farmworker protests against injustice – and the 20th-century experience of the Land Girls – members of the Women's Land Army. These moments brought critical change in rural spaces, but Federici's work prompts us to be mindful of hidden processes of exploitation and convenience. Many Swing Rioters were transported but then played a part in colonising processes – victims here became perpetrators there. The wartime service of Land Girls reminds us that agriculture survived labour shortages on the back of women's work but soon reverted to business as usual. The masks have been woven for purpose, their design alluding to fanciful Frazerian myths of the "corn spirit". These items allow for craft and cultivation to be reclaimed as feminine and communal, rather than masculine and hierarchical. Beside all of this is a vitrine of materials for making anthotypes – images created from photosensitive natural pigments – one of which is also on display. Plants are grown and nurtured as part of the process, and used to record acts of growing, making and performing. A new narrative of women's work is simultaneously planted and pictured.

Moving on we pass the appropriately titled *Our Country* Lives gallery and a massive textile wall hanging. Dyed with an abstract landscape scene, it hints at a pre-enclosure aesthetic. Although designed by a male artist, it was made with the hard work of his highly skilled studio assistants, two young sisters. Created for display in the Country Pavilion of the 1951 Festival of Britain, this artwork emerged at a moment of significant change for the English rural. Farming was becoming mechanised and divorced from the shared experience of a larger workforce. Chemical interventions were commonplace, addressing food security but reaping immense environmental damage along the way. All the while, as the mid-century break up of Empire took place, and stolen territories regained some agency, agricultural extension imposed new, neo-colonial controls on landscapes across the globe. This instance of change, marked by these stunning wall hangings, was a Plantationoscene moment; another

addition to familiar processes of enclosure, and the agricultural exploitation of shared natural resources.

Now we turn back on ourselves into the *Wagon Walk*, a gallery dominated by monumental horse-drawn farm vehicles. This space speaks of community adaptations and ingenuity. Many wagons were decorated with vivid colours indicative of regional identity, or had wheels or bodies formulated to fit the requirements of local landscapes. Here we encounter three more largescale pieces by Morland. The techniques used fit comfortably in these surroundings. Colourful cordage echoes the boldness of the painted wagons, and unfired clays sourced near the artist's home speak to the earthy nature of working vehicles. Natural fibres blend quietly into wooden tones of old collections that surround them. Further temporary additions – ancient fossils, woven plastic matting from Senegal and polystyrene pieces – add layers of longevity, globalism and environmental threat.

And finally, we come to a series of big printed textiles, draped over wagons at one end of the gallery. These are the work of Sigrid Holmwood, whose self-styled peasant persona is shaped by ideas of folk culture that echo the Scandinavian and continental inspirations behind rural museums like The MERL. Holmwood's prints depict complex narratives of gendered and colonial violence and misogyny. Indeed, some feature images of witch trials, recalling Federici's well-known revisionist and critical rethinking of those histories. The pigments used are directly referential to these same contexts of appropriation and exploitation. Their importance is emphasised by a case of woad samples drawn from The MERL's own collection and displayed alongside. This reference to local practice speaks to the vital importance of indigenous knowledge about landscapes, nature and the environment. Wagons peek out from beneath the protective veil of these transformative prints, at once obscuring and revealing the different pasts that underpin The MERL's collections. And here, finally, Haraway's Chthulucene comes to the fore. Pigments reclaimed from a colonised past by an indigenous artist are shared as creative commons, and utilised here in the present to make critical statements about our collective future.

And this is where The MERL and the role of museums feel relevant again: in this intersection between creativity,

heritage, storytelling and display, and in the conflicted act of covering things up to facilitate a process of revelation. Here, at this crossroads moment in a museum, is where we end our tour but begin our common journey. Together we can help change rural life and ways of living for the better, safeguard our heritage and sustain our shared natural resources. We can all play our part in both reclaiming and re-enchanting the commons, past, present *and* future.

March 2022

Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia; London: Pluto, 2004)

Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (New York: Power of Women Collective/Falling Wall Press, 1975)

James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (New York/London: Macmillan and Co., 1894)

Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin' in *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015, pp. 159-165

The Commons Team, with Ollie Douglas. *The Commons: Re-Enchanting the World* (https://merl.reading.ac.uk/explore/online-exhibitions/the-commons-re-enchanting-the-world/)

The COMMONS ARTISTS

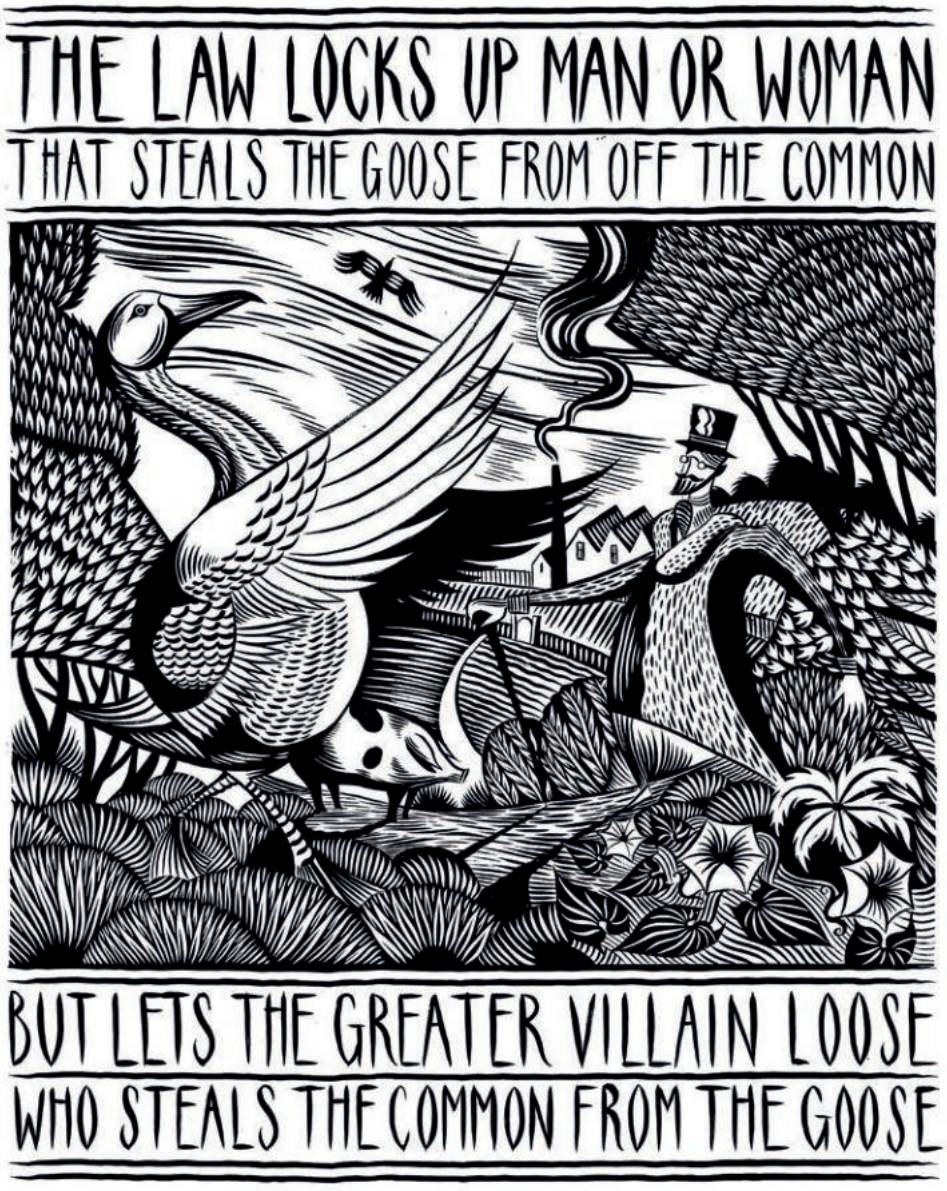


Illustration by Nick Hayes

The Commons: Re-enchanting the World
by Sigrid Holmwood

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose.

Anon., 18th century

This English folk poem, which so eloquently sums up the inequities and injustices of the enclosures, has been used to open many discussions on the idea of the commons. It was written in protest at the series of enclosure acts during the 18th century that appropriated common land into private hands and denied common folk ancient rights of access and usage – such as grazing livestock and collecting wood for fuel. Indeed, while the height of the enclosure movement was during the 18th century and undertaken in the name of improving the efficiency of agriculture, the process in England actually began earlier in the 16th century. Rather than trying to increase food production, rich landowners enclosed common land in order to create sheep pasture and benefit from the lucrative wool trade at the time, demonstrating that the main motivation has always really been profit rather than feeding the masses.[1] Certainly there were many losers as a result of the enclosures – the numbers of rural poor increased and old ways of living with the land were suppressed as people were thrust into the world of wage labour. Silvia Federici sees encroachments onto common land as part of a series of tactics on the part of European elites, along with the great witch hunts and the persecution of vagabonds, to keep power and stifle new revolutionary ideas that emerged from the peasant class in the wake of the crisis of feudalism.[2]

Art produced at the height of the enclosure movement in the 18th century played a role in *naturalising* these inequities in rural life. A naturalistic style of painting helped to convince viewers that what was depicted was an accurate representation of reality, and at the same time, through the genre of landscape, it constructed the idea of "nature" as something separate to humans.

Ann Bermingham has pointed out that the bucolic landscapes of the beloved English painter John Constable omit the tell-tale straight hedgerows of the enclosures.[3] Bermingham also argues that Constable's paintings romanticise the ragged peasants as if they were a part of the natural order of things, and thereby outside the realm of political intervention. In this sense the category of "nature" belongs to the "natural sciences", but does not come under the "human sciences" of politics and ethics. Landscape painting helped to construct this sense of nature as something "over there" separate from the bourgeois viewer, to be enjoyed aesthetically but also to be appropriated as a resource – a capitalist relationship to land made famously apparent in Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (around 1750). Bruno Latour has described this as "the Great Divide" – the separation of man from nature, humans from non-humans, "moderns" from "non-moderns". [4]

Our artistic response to The MERL collection seeks to highlight these historical inequities and their contemporary ramifications, and to imagine alternatives. The title for the exhibition comes from Federici's book *Re-enchanting the World* (2019), which is a collection of essays she has published over the years taking a feminist position on the politics of the commons.[5] The idea of the commons has become a powerful concept used by activists as a mode of resistance to the contemporary privatisation of capitalism beyond the rural context. In the age of the internet it has been used to defend public access to knowledge through movements such as Creative Commons. However, we must also be careful not to have too Eurocentric a view of the commons, and recognise that not only do non-European peoples have strong practices of commoning, but that the European concept of the commons has its own problematic side. Firstly, the feudal system under which the commons, and these ancient rights of access and usage, were developed was far from being a peasant Utopia. Secondly, the notion of the commons itself was later used to justify colonialism. Jeffrey Atteberry points to the fact that the English philosopher John Locke used the idea of the commons to differentiate the process by which the "common resources of the earth" granted by God could be annexed as private property through labour – a notion of labour based on European agricultural practices.[6] Consequently, the supposedly "un-laboured" lands of

indigenous peoples could be claimed by Europeans as part of the common treasury available for appropriation into private property. This justification of colonialism through Western models of land usage persists today, enshrined in the legal concepts of terra nullius and the doctrine of discovery.[7] Sam Wallman is a comic artist and activist based in Australia, a land appropriated from the Aboriginal people using these legal structures. It also served as a penal colony to which British convicts were transported as punishment for petty crimes largely arising out of poverty. This demonstrates the complex relationship between the economic displacement of the proletariat in Europe and the settler colonies that displaced indigenous peoples outside of Europe – as Wallman calls it, an "original sin… a bad seed". His wall hanging made specially for The MERL, which he points out was created on unceded Wurundjeri Aboriginal land, calls on us to spit out this piece of gravel, to reject the logic of the enclosures. He points out that the common land still belongs to the people, that the legal structures that enclose it are imaginary, although still lethal. Drawn in the style of a trade union banner, it evokes a history of protest art made for collective audiences, calls to collaborative action – a far cry from landscape painting orientated towards the aesthetic experience of an individual viewer.

Catherine Morland's work similarly rejects the familiar forms of Western European "high" art, in favour of working with plant fibres, twining and basketry – practices that have been considered craft rather than art. Elizabeth Wayland Barber has argued that archaeologists have historically overlooked the importance of fibre work and weaving in human development in part due to the perishable nature of these materials, but also due to its association with women's work. In her book *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years* (1994), she coined the term "the String Revolution" to describe the radical technological leap of twining and weaving that took place in the Palaeolithic period.[8] Afterall, string has an enormous amount of usage, from cordage to basketry to clothing. Wayland Barber hypothesises that such practices became women's work due to their compatibility with gardening, gathering, childcare and other domestic labour associated with women. As Federici has famously pointed out, at the onset of wage labour in conjunction with the enclosures, these types of labour – especially childbirth and care, which she calls reproductive labour – became unpaid and as such denigrated.

Yet they are essential for the reproduction of a labour force. Woman's labour is a form of common labour that has been silently appropriated by capitalism.

When it comes to the histories of basketry and matting that Morland references in her work, the materials were often gathered from common land, from wild plants such as rushes and nettles, performing an important role in the maintenance of the ecosystem. For example, East Anglia's fenlands require the regular harvest of reeds and rushes to prevent their silting up. While common land seemed unproductive, it in fact had a variety of uses, and in turn these human interventions served an important function. Morland's sculptural pieces reflect these uncultivated "wastelands" (as common land was also called in the past) and its contemporary counterparts. Dried plants in their autumnal stage of life are gently entwined with colourful whisps of plastic remnants. On the one hand, this a damning reflection of the polluted state of these peripheral spaces, but on the other hand Morland's recycling of plastic into sculptural forms and basketry alongside plants projects a sense of care and optimism. Moreover, she demonstrates that rather than being "waste" these spaces are filled with materials of value that can be used sustainably.

My own work links to Wallman's work with colonialism and Morland's work with plants by telling the histories of colonialism and capitalism through plants used to make pigments and dyes. I have made long printed textiles using a technique drawing on ancient Indian methods for the making of "chintzes" or "calicos" that became an immensely popular commodity in Europe, eventually copied by European textile industries. The patterns themselves refer to the histories of the plant materials used to make them – chains with indigo reflect the use of enslaved Africans in American and Caribbean plantations. Not only did the plantation owners exploit African labour, they appropriated their extensive knowledge of indigo extraction. Another pattern depicts brazilwood production (which gave Brazil its name) from its felling by Tupi Amerindians along the Amazonian coast, resulting in its endangerment, to its rasping by prisoners in Amsterdam. Michel Foucault described the correctional institution of the Rasphuis, where brazilwood was rasped, as the first bourgeois prison where vagabonds were punished and redeemed through labour and routine. I contrast these extractive relationships to

plant colour with other ways of living with plant dyes occluded by the processes of capitalism. One print depicts instruments of torture used in the great witch hunts, which Federici argues were a tool to control women's reproductive labour. It is printed with madder roots, a plant used as an abortifacient in European folk medicine before it became taboo and associated with witchcraft. In other prints I have used Mayan blue, a pigment made by the Mayan artist Luis Manuel May Ku using a recently rediscovered ancient Mayan technology of spiritual significance that was lost in the wake of colonialism.

According to Amerindian thought such as that of the Tupi and the Maya, plants are sentient beings, not merely a natural resource for use. Indeed, they are considered another form of humanity, merely with a body different to ours.[9] As such, when we eat plants, we are cannibals. This is a concept reflected in my patterns of bones, and of feasting witches and cannibals, and it is also underlined by Amanda Couch's work *Becoming With Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others)*. In Couch's work, eating wheat is the most intimate form of becoming wheat and it is made manifest in the ritual of the feast. It is a meal that is shared by a community in which the being of the foodstuffs is incorporated into the participants' bodies – a form of transubstantiation. By choosing the phrase *More-Than*-Human, rather than *non*-human, Couch resists "the Great Divide" between man and nature that Latour identifies. Couch grants wheat an agency in our relationship with it. Indeed, Latour draws on Isabelle Stengers' idea of "cosmopolitics" in his criticism of "the Great Divide" as a call to include things historically excluded from the sphere of politics and ethics. Stengers and Latour imagine a "parliament of things" in which beings who cannot speak are nonetheless represented.[10] The commons is not just about sharing natural resources with other humans, it is about living well with all other kinds of beings. These entangled relationships are clearly shown in Couch's collaboration with Josefin Vargö, in which living cultures of yeast are shared, exchanged and mixed to bake wheat bread. Couch's reinvented rituals around wheat cultivation, with corn dolly-inspired masks and "spirit" photography made with plant emulsions, evoke the presence of plant beings as a vital part of the cosmopolitical commons – (re)enchantment as incantation.

Of course, the etymology of enchantment and incantation comes from *cantare*,

the Latin for "to sing", which takes us to the work of Kelechi Anucha and Carl Gent. They have collaborated to create sculptural listening posts that play their interpretations of English folk songs in response to The MERL collection. One such object responds to a bottle of ribbon, brocade and silk, packed in salt, which is part of The MERL's Lavinia Smith collection. Such bottles were a customary gift from a groom to his new bride to indicate she was "worth her salt", reminding us once again of the importance of the unpaid domestic and reproductive labour of women. Their feminist takeover of the Morris stick with jangling hoop earrings and alcopop bottle caps, alongside their accompanying version of *Our Captain Cried All Hands / He Who Would Valiant Be*, retorts that girls should instead love each other. In keeping with the theme of enchantment, these works reveal the syncretism of folk culture that combines magic and pagan beliefs with Christianity. One of the songs, *John Barleycorn*, chimes with Couch's cannibalistic relationship to wheat, and the cannibalistic themes in my plant pigments and patterns. In this song, barley is treated as a person whose body goes through a number of violent processes before being turned into beer to be imbibed. This reminds us that treating plants as people is not the preserve of Amerindian thought, but that a cosmopolitics of natural and supernatural beings was long a feature of European folk culture.

Indeed, one of Latour's arguments about "the Great Divide" is that it is powerful yet illusory, much like the legal structures used to enclose the commons, as Wallman has pointed out in his banner. In his famous book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), Latour argues that these separations between man and nature, human and non-human, the modern and the primitive, have been potent constructs that obscure the reality that our lives are entangled with a multitude of beings and agencies of human and more-than-human origin.[11] Moreover, we have never fully lost the commons. Anucha and Gent show us that folk songs are themselves a form of the commons. Impossible to individually own or to privatise, they are a collective production – circulating through time and context, travelling along trajectories of colonisation and migration, reinterpreted and reused by different people in different places. Federici explains that for her, re-enchanting the world means to work within a different logic and rationality to that of capitalism. Perhaps we should begin by noticing our numerous daily practices that already operate under a different set

of entangled cosmopolitical relations – whether it is gathering, singing, weaving, exchanging, caring or feasting. Let us remember the last lines of the poem that began this discussion: *And geese will still a common lack / Till they go and steal it back.*

[1] Peter J. Bowden, *Wool Trade in Tudor and Stuart England*, Routledge, 2015.

[2] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia, 2004. Given that this exhibition took place during the pandemic, it is interesting to note that many historians believe that the crisis of feudalism came about as a result of the series of plagues that hit Europe during the medieval period. This resulted in a labour shortage that enabled peasants to break their bonds of serfdom.

[3] Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition*, 1740-1860, University of California Press, 1989.

[4] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, 1993.

[5] Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, 2018.

[6] Jeffrey Atteberry, 'Information/Knowledge in the Global Society of Control: A2K Theory and the Postcolonial Commons', in Gaëlle Krikorian and Amy Kapczynski (eds.), *Access to Knowledge in the Age of Intellectual Property*, Zone Books, 2010, pp. 329-52.

[7] Tina Ngata, *Kia Mau: Resisting Colonial Fictions*, Kia Mau Campaign, 2019.

[8] Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years – Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times*, W.W. Norton, 1995.

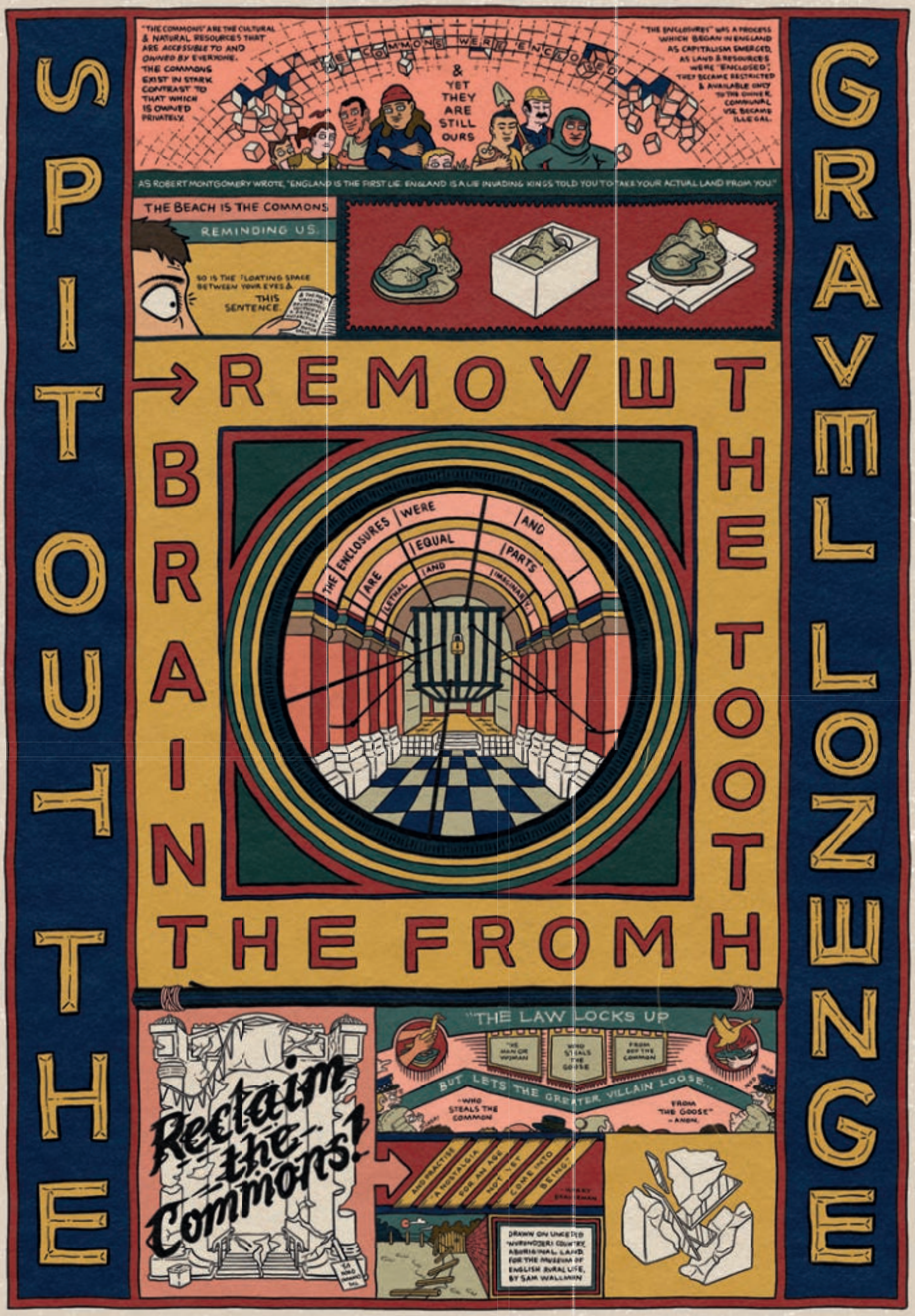
[9] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, Univocal Publishing, 2014.

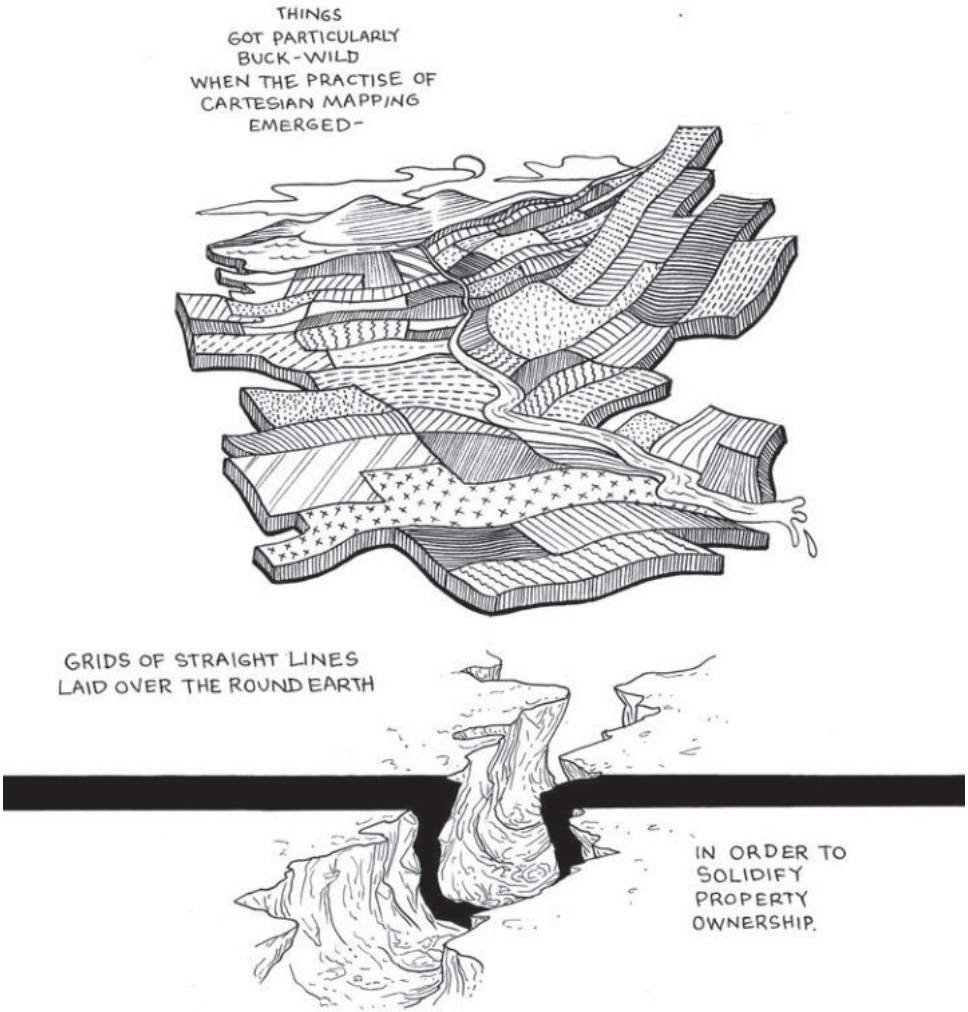
[10] Isabelle Stengers, 'The Cosmopolitical Proposal', in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, MIT Press, 2005, pp. 994-1003; Bruno Latour, 'Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics? Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck', *Common Knowledge*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2004), pp. 450-62.

[11] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, 1993.

Sam
Wallman

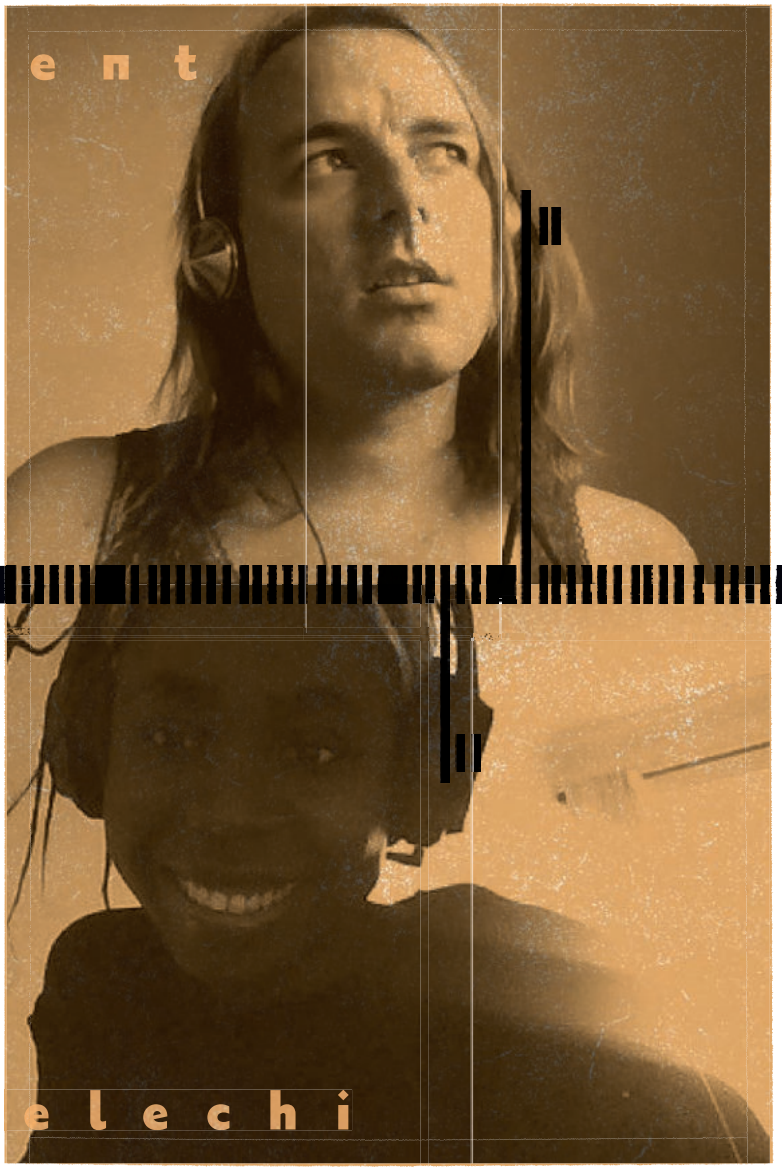
The enclosure of the commons could be seen as one of the ruling class's original sins – a bad seed of so many of our crises, all crashing together and intertwining. The enclosures are a form of primitive accumulation, which Marx described as "those moments when great masses of (people) are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled as free and 'unattached' proletarians on the labour-market". The colonial project of Australia, from where I write this, began as a nation through a process of enclosure. A bad seed indeed. But we have to believe that all weeds can be pulled. And that we may yet see a return to the commons.


"THE COMMONS" ARE THE CULTURAL & NATURAL RESOURCES THAT ARE ACCESSIBLE TO AND OWNED BY EVERYONE. THE COMMONS EXIST IN STARK CONTRAST TO THAT WHICH IS OWNED PRIVATELY.
THE COMMONS WERE ENCLOSED
& YET THEY ARE STILL OURS
"THE ENCLOSURES" WAS A PROCESS WHICH BEGAN IN ENGLAND AS CAPITALISM EMERGED, AS LAND & RESOURCES WERE "ENCLOSED", THEY BECAME RESTRICTED & AVAILABLE ONLY TO THE OWNER. COMMUNAL USE BECAME ILLEGAL.
AS ROBERT MONTGOMERY WROTE, "ENGLAND IS THE FIRST LIE. ENGLAND IS A LIE INVADING KINGS TOLD YOU TO TAKE YOUR ACTUAL LAND FROM YOU."
THE BEACH IS THE COMMONS
REMINDING US.
SO IS THE FLOATING SPACE BETWEEN YOUR EYES & THIS SENTENCE.
SPIT OUT THE
GRAVEL LOZENGE
REMOVE THE TOOTH FROM THE BRAIN
THE ENCLOSURES WERE AND ARE EQUAL PARTS LETHAL AND IMAGINARY
Reclaim the Commons!
"THE LAW LOCKS UP
THE MAN OR WOMAN
WHO STEALS THE GOOSE
FROM OFF THE COMMON
BUT LETS THE GREATER VILLAIN LOOSE...
WHO STEALS THE COMMON
FROM THE GOOSE"
- ANON.
AND PRACTISE "A NOSTALGIA FOR AN AGE NOT YET COME INTO BEING"
DRAWN ON UNCEDED WURUNDJERI COUNTRY, ABORIGINAL LAND, FOR THE MUSEUM OF ENGLISH RURAL LIFE, BY SAM WALLMAN



Detail of So Below, 2016, and Reclaim The Commons banner by Sam Wallman

Carl Gent



Kelechi Anucha

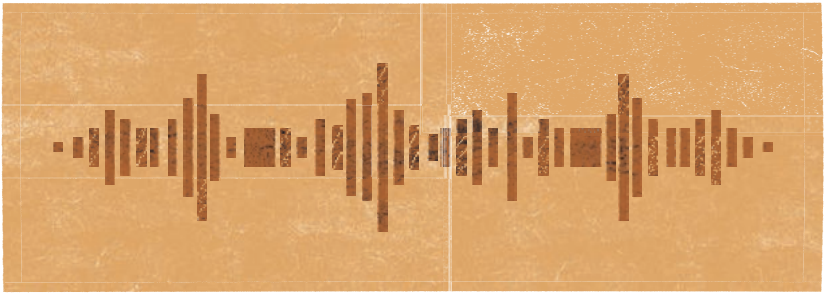
"Briefly in the 00s I lived in a church. This church had been converted into council flats, predominantly housing people who had previously been sectioned. As you can guess, the Right to Buy Act of 1985 saw several of these flats pass into private hands. This place of communal worship was now host to a mix of original council house tenants, those people designated 'young professionals', vacant flats and, now, some art students. There were still communal areas in this previously public building. The vestry with its stained glass and stained carpet was a beautiful space but was mostly left alone. Then, my last summer there, something fairly wonderful happened. Spontaneously, the tenants decided to renovate the surrounding grassy area long neglected by the council. Tentative thoughts grew large as imagination and then the labour kicked in. The stagnant earth was quickly tilled, domestic waste was removed and dizzying talk of vegetable patches and even a hot tub started to become a reality. Less busy residents were even offering to maintain more preoccupied residents' plots, for the communal good.

You can guess how it ended. Waverley Borough Council were not into it. A change of land use from a patch of grass and dog-ends into something that the occupants could use to grow food, work together and just hang out: not permitted.

So when I think of the commons this is one of the things that comes to mind. That swift encounter with the bureaucratic limbs of the state. Reminding the poor in quite clear terms that their land and their ingenuity is not theirs to use, not like that – is never to be used to benefit their own existence, nor to threaten the robust stratification of this nation.

Scrump away say I."

Carl Gent, Autumn 2021



Not everything held in common can be seized so readily. An immaterial vessel for narrative and melody, the supposed low-cultural form of English folk music has weathered countless cultural upheavals over the centuries. These songs have also travelled with colonialism, accreting newer contexts that call us to attend to the negations and absences co-constructed through and with the English folk imaginary. It is these songs and their potential radicality as a sonic commons that have formed the focal point for the audio, sculptural and live works we have produced for *The Commons: Re-enchanting the World*.

Where in the hazily bucolic and familiar sounds of English folk does this radicality reside? In important ways, there is something that is inherently anti-capitalist and anti-individualist in all traditional song. You can copyright a recording of these songs but you cannot own the song. You pick it up, add your take on it and then pass the story on to another. You become a collaborator or maybe a co-author, with thousands of other singers, but never the owner of the song. Carriers for meaning, these stories, forms and vessels are shared, updated and disseminated as required.

They are a reintroduction to a sonic commons – things that cannot be owned by an individual and are publicly available for all who need them.

The listening posts we have produced for *The Commons: Re-enchanting the World* are both updatable broadcast posts, playing new recordings of a range of folk songs and sculptural translations of each song's narrative content.

As the different works sing in the space, the sculptures become a provisional choir, temporarily vocalising recordings that are enmeshed with vitally distinct tales of loves lost, industry, faith, emigration and working the land.

Notes on the songs:

Our Captain Cried All Hands / He Who Would Valiant Be

A well-known hymn, *He Who Would Valiant Be* came about when Vaughan Williams set John Bunyan's *To Be A Pilgrim* lyrics to the melody of traditional folk song *Our Captain Cried All Hands*. Wanting to look more closely at the passage of "pagan" song into church hymn and what the two shared, we interbred the differing sets of lyrics and generated a version that prioritised girlhood knowledge:

There's no belief in men, not my own brother,
so girls if you can love, love one another.

Wanting to both reference the historical femicide that accompanied the Enclosures Act and to draw a lineage into contemporary realms of girlhood knowledge, we decided to make a percussive Morris stick. However, as opposed to the traditional bells and ribbons, our version makes its clatters and tinkles using hoop earrings, false nails and alcopop bottle caps.

John Barleycorn

A very famous old tune with countless variations, *John Barleycorn* focuses on how specifically English notions of the pastoral, the spiritual, the pagan and the Christian are irrevocably embedded in the literal landscape. Essentially a song about turning barley into beer, the anthropomorphised barley goes through countless forms of violence and resurrections until transforming into beer.

However, it might also be about competing belief systems between both the pagan and the Christian, the material and the divine, where *John Barleycorn* is an iteration of the ancient Corn God, and

the three human protagonists are the Holy Trinity, attempting to bury the old gods into the soil of England. Inevitably John Barleycorn cannot be suppressed, and that most ubiquitous of English materialities, beer, is the byproduct.

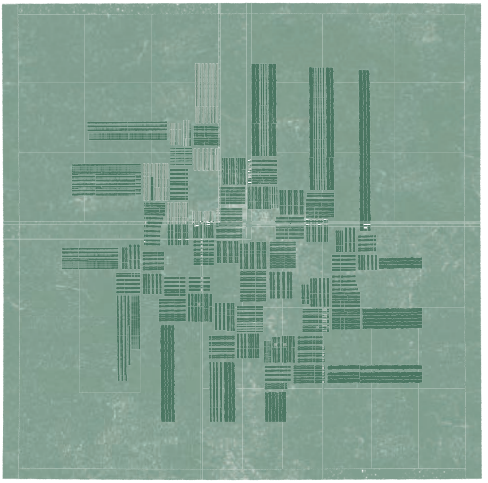
The Spermwhale Fishery

Wanting to work directly with one of the objects held in The MERL's collections, we decided to link our version of the whaling/heartbreak song *The Spermwhale Fishery* with a unique item held in the Lavinia Smith archive – a glass bottle, filled with salt and 16 pieces of ribbon, brocade and silk that is believed to be a traditional marriage gift, also sealed with a copper coin.

With a range of fishing wire, pitch tar and wedding linen we have made a laced bridal surround, a doily for the absent glass bottle to rest upon, stitched with the pitch and wire that has taken the protagonist's lover away from her.

Catherine Morland

I have used basketry and cordage, weaving and knots, some of the earliest domestic collaborative activities, to make my installations. I see basketwork as a form of commons. Most materials used for basketry originate from plants. There is a relationship between the maker and materials (especially if you grow your own materials), an interaction between different species that requires care as well as dexterity and ecological knowledge. I learnt that there are advantages to knowing about the lifecycle and habitat of the plants and how to harvest and sort them as well as understanding their potential to be transformed, plaited or twisted into shape. I collected most of the plant material from my immediate environment; local parks, roadside verges and my own garden. My original plan was to forage for the plants at the end of the summer and leave the stems, leaves and flowers to dry in my studio over the winter until ready for use. But with the Covid pandemic I had all this extra time ahead of me, a whole growing season. I was able to start from scratch and grow some plants myself by collecting the seeds from the harvest, planting them, looking after them and watching them grow in the garden outside my studio before using them in the work. I became immersed in the lifecycle of my plant companions.



" The string revolution was a profound event in human history. When people started to fool around with plants and plant by-products, that opened vast new avenues of human progress."[1]

James M. Adovasio

I started learning about cordage and basketry after seeing how the Turkana pastoralists in Kenya make use of the plant materials growing around them to build their homes and make string for containers and baskets. This handiwork using the most minimal of means stayed with me, and I set myself the task of learning basketry techniques using materials I could forage or recycle. Most of these processes are used in my installations in The MERL galleries: cordage, weaving, plaiting, twining, coiling, looping and netting. Four woven pieces were installed amongst the exhibits of the *Hearth and Home Gallery*, a domestic space that explores the history of the rural kitchen interior. Three larger woven installations, *The Gatherings 1-3*, were installed in the *Wagon Walk* – a long purpose-built space that is home to the museum's collection of more than 20 beautiful wooden horse-drawn farm vehicles that remind us of the labour-intensive nature of farm work before the age of mechanisation. *The Gatherings*, nestled between these immense wagons, make reference to the women's work and subsistence living that

would have been happening at the same time, a reminder that not all labour would have been in the field.

My woven pieces were not planned to be finished objects – instead I left them untrimmed, entangled and messy. It seemed to me that when the ends of the weft are neatened and hidden away, conceptually this is when the transformation from plant to material to object takes place, and I wanted to keep this ambiguous and open ended, as an exploration of process and making. Sometimes, having started a particular technique, a basket would begin to form, and instead of finishing it at a recognisable size or shape I just kept going to see where it would lead, or until I ran out of material. I am interested in good craftsmanship but not as an end in itself. I am also ambivalent about using the word craft in my work as we tend to use it to describe a hobby, or an activity that people do in their leisure time. I'm more interested in when these processes were seen as innovative and vital, rather than when they lost status and were designated a craft because other technologies took their place. I thought it would be interesting not only to work with the plant fibre that I extracted for weaving but also with the plant itself – hence the forest of large plant stems held in natural clay that make up two of *The Gatherings*. There is a back and forth between the plants and the materials, and sometimes there is no distinction between them. Some manmade materials were added to the mix, including netting from fruit packaging and waste plastic bags made into cordage.

In the quote above, James M. Adovasio, an expert on perishable artifacts, was discussing a book by Elizabeth Wayland Barber, an archaeologist whose research into the history of textiles reveals the influential role women's fibre work played in ancient societies. Cordage came first and can be made by twisting short filaments of fibre together – you can keep adding to make it as long and strong as needed. This led to inventions such as weaving, cloth, clothes, ritual cloth, blankets, sheets, tapestries, tablecloths, embroidery, knitting and much more. "So powerful … is simple string in taming the world to human will and ingenuity that I suspect it to be the unseen weapon that allowed the human race to conquer the earth, that enabled us to move out into every econiche on the globe … We could call it the String Revolution."[2] The perishable nature of these materials and their association with women's work has probably contributed to their lesser status

as cultural markers of human progress. It's just a shame those 19th-century scientists didn't think of this – we could have justifiably had a "String" age before those heavyweights of bronze, iron and stone were given their own period of prehistory.

Just as it's hard to imagine how commoners lived off the land in an age such as ours, when co-operative enterprise is not the norm, it is equally hard to forget that there were times when most of the hours of a woman's day had to be spent making everything from scratch, planting, harvesting, spinning, weaving and sewing. Perhaps all the messing around I did with plants and plant fibres during lockdown with the help of my daughter to make the work for this show will go some way to acknowledging these innovations and to help celebrate the work of my foraging forebears, all the sisters, aunts, mothers and grandmothers whose days were filled with the labours of reproduction.

I find myself in alignment with Ursula K. Le Guin's carrier bag theory of human evolution, where she describes finding a strong connection with her own ancient history for the first time when thinking about how, contrary to common perception, making a container out of string was just as important for humanity as the making of the first stone tools. "If to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time…"[3]

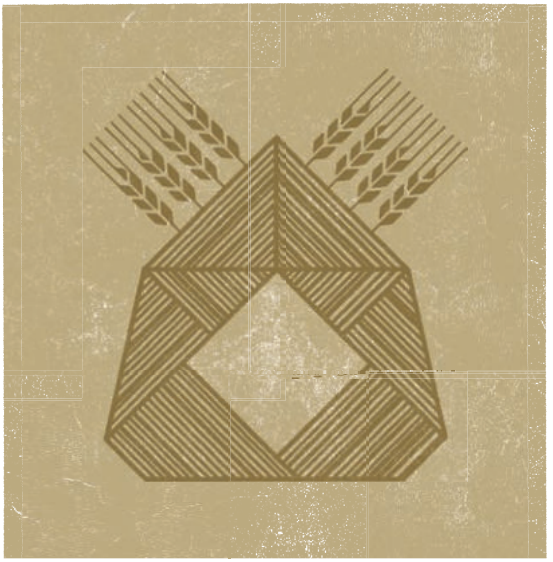
[1] James M. Adovasio quoted by Natalie Angier in 'Furs for Evening, but Cloth was the Stone Age Standby', *The New York Times*, 14 December 1999.

[2] Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years – Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times*, W.W. Norton, 1995, p. 45.

[3] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Ignota Books, 2019, p. 152.

Amanda couch

For many years I've been exploring the continued fascination with innards in the human imagination, particularly through the ancient practice of extispicy (divination using the entrails): a way of engaging interconnectedness between the gut and the world. The ancients believed in bodies "in common", believing in a correlation between the bodies in the cosmos, human events and actions, and the inside of sacrificed animals. When I started to explore our long and enduring relationship with wheat through *Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others)*, my focus was particularly on commoning through eating, drawing on the root of the word "companion", from the Latin *cum panis* – meaning "with bread".[1] As the Covid pandemic developed I became acutely aware of the more-than-human or ecological commons and our porousness as organisms, in relation to breath. During the first national lockdown in spring/summer 2020, the respiratory nature of the virus and my increased anxiety instigated a different companionship with the wheat in my garden. Over a month and a half, I made a series of daily actions where I knelt over and breathed deeply onto the developing shoots, commoning with them to embody the vital continuous entanglement between us, humans and plants, via the exchange and transformation of carbon dioxide and oxygen.



Through the wheat plant, its histories, mythology and materiality, *Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others)* (2018-ongoing) explores our relationship with wheat as well as the other human and more-than-human entities that are entangled within the kinship. Wheat and humans have been companion species since our ancestors in the Near East domesticated grass-derived crops about 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Anthropologist Anna Tsing calls this monogamous and monocultural relationship a "love affair [...] one of the great romances of human history [where] people transferred their affection from multi-species landscapes to shower intimacy upon one or two particular crops".[2]

Over the last few years in my garden and at The MERL, I have been companioning with wheat by cultivating plants in plots in the shape of the lozenge or rhombus, a symbol that can be traced back to Neolithic times, believed to represent the female vulva. A variation of the lozenge that contains dots representing sown grains, named as the "fertile field", is identified by 20th-century Russian ethnographer B.A. Rybakov, making connections between 19th-century folk customs and forms depicted on Neolithic

fertility figures.[3] Lithuanian-American anthropologist Marija Gimbutas also identified lozenge shapes in Cucuteni-Trypillian figurines, where exaggerated pregnant figures were incised or painted with lozenge shapes embedded with actual grain in the abdomens.[4]

During sowing and harvesting, I have been donning botano-morphic masks where human, plant and myth collide. These masks, informed by The MERL's collection of corn dollies, attempt to channel the grain spirits that were once believed to live within cereal crops. Some supposed that the spirit of the field was driven into the final sheaf during reaping. These stalks were then woven into vessels where the spirit would take refuge over winter. As well as being worn during the planting and reaping of my wheat, the masks are displayed in the galleries amid images and examples of machinery that replaced the sickle and scythe, curtailing over time the last sheaf customs that accompanied manual harvesting. The masks merge the supposed dichotomy of nature and culture: Maris Widgeon wheat (nature) is intertwined hrough straw craft (culture).

The durational films showing in the galleries document the sowing, weeding, caring for and just "being" of the wheat responding to and entangling with the elements. Such activities are influenced by queer physicist Karen Barad's ideas that the world is an ongoing performance "tak[ing] place everywhere all the time".[5] The resulting durational films, which last for over an hour, are examples of two performances: the everyday performance occurring in the world; and, as artist-researcher Annette Arlander observes, a particular performance isolated from the everyday performance, compositionally and temporally framed by the camera, which is subsequently edited.[6]

The 1880s saw the joining of reaper and threshing machines into the combine harvester, and with it the decline of traditional practices. In the same decade, a boom in spirit photography ensued, picturing supernatural entities in the medium. During cultivating rituals, I attempt to capture in photographic grain the manifestation of grain spirits and arrest what the eye cannot see. Mirroring the effects of light on plant growth, the resulting pinhole phantasmagorias have been printed as anthotypes, a Victorian process utilising emulsions extracted from plants. These images – made from laying positives against paper coated with light-sensitive pigment and placed for often

long periods in sunlight to emerge – must then be shielded from UV light, otherwise they will eventually fade, reminding us, as philosopher Michael Marder writes, that plants "flourish on the edge or at the limit of phenomenality, of visibility".[7]

During the project at The MERL, I instigated what Silvia Federici would call a "rurbanisation", an urban garden and "form of sociality that thrive[s] under the radar of money/market economy".[8] Becoming with Wheat Companions, a group of growers from community gardens, allotments and museum visitors interested in learning from each other – and the wheat – first met in early March 2020, before the first UK national lockdown, where we shared knowledge and decided on aspects of the planting. For example, we chose re3grow, a locally sourced compost and example of closed loop recycling made from Reading residents' garden waste. The choice of grain was informed by The MERL's wheat collection of archaeobotanist John Letts, visits to the University of Reading Herbarium, advice from Andy Forbes of Brockwell Bake and Josefin Vargö's research. Vargö offered YQ wheat to join the emmer wheat gifted from RISC (Reading International Solidarity Centre), who grow it in their roof garden, and emmer and einkorn saved from previous years' wheat harvests in my garden.

Drawing on Arlander's way of articulating the artistic-research process as akin to that of a "dispersed vegetal being", *Becoming with Wheat…* is a scattering, manifesting not as a single outcome, but rather multiple germinations, crops, cycles and iterations – many of which are speculative and ongoing, with the aim of cultivating a more connected, sensitive way of being with plants, landscape, people and food.[9]

[1] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 11.

[2] Anna Tsing, 'Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species', *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2012), p. 145.

[3] B.A. Rybakov, 'Cosmogony and Mythology of the Agriculturists of the Eneolithic', *Soviet Anthropology and Archeology*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1965), p. 21, cited in Linda Welters (ed.), *Folk Dress in Europe and Anatolia: Beliefs About Protection and Fertility*, Berg Publishers, 1999.

[4] Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: Myths and Cult Images*, Thames & Hudson, 1982, p. 205

[5] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 335.

[6] Annette Arlander, 'Resting with Pines in Nida – attempts at performing with plants', *Performance Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2019), p. 458. https://doi.org/10.21476/PP.2019.42232

[7] Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 9.

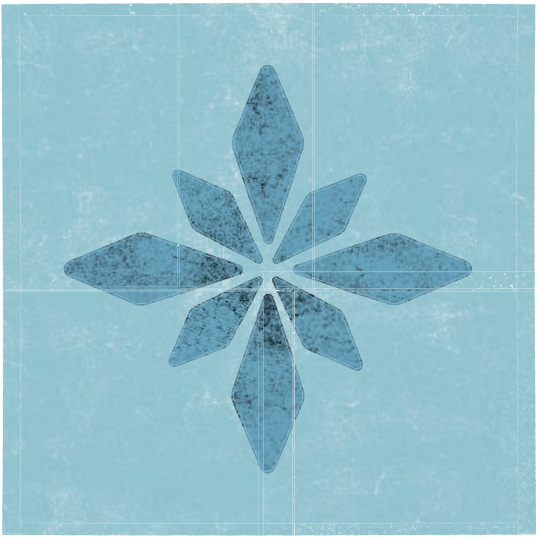
[8] Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, 2019, p. 108.

[9] Arlander, op. cit., p. 469.

sigrid

Holmwood

Luce Giard, writing in Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), talks of a "life and death of gestures", referring to the way in which bodily gestures in activities such as cooking may cease to be passed on as technological change, rendering them obsolete. Yet, materials themselves can be seen as repositories of gestures, in the way that they demand a certain treatment. For instance, while there are some 30 to 40 species of unrelated plants worldwide that contain indigo, people living with these plants have all discovered the mysterious processes needed to bring forth the blue – whether it is woad in Europe, *ch'oj* in Yucatan, *elu* in West Africa, *ai* in Japan or *neel* in Bengal. In this way, dye plants themselves have agency and can pass on the gestures needed to give up their colour, even if there has been a break in human-to-human transmission. When I am working with dye plants, I feel like I am meeting with the past generations from all around the world that have also worked with these plants. My gestures must be similar to their gestures, like a re-enacted dance tracing our common history.



Woad, the only plant native to Europe that contains the blue pigment indigo, was one of the earliest cash crops. Indeed, woad was so lucrative that the mythical Land of Cockaigne, the peasant fantasy of the land of plenty, is believed to get its name from the French for woad balls, *cocagne*. The MERL possesses some samples of woad, and wool dyed with woad, in its archives. These samples come from the last woad mill in England: Parson Drove, near Wisbech, which was demolished in 1914. As tropical indigo began to be imported in large quantities during the colonial period, from slave plantations in the Americas and later from colonial India, woad cultivation in Europe declined. It continued to be used in small quantities to aid the fermentation of vats using tropical indigo, until aniline dyes replaced natural indigo entirely in the early 20th century. Rather than romanticising plant dyes, my works point out that plant dyes were a driver for colonisation, industrialisation and capitalism, as well as a source of folklore and magic. While the extensive common knowledge of plant dyes around the world is remarkable, it is also important to bear in mind what we have not had in common – the moments where other peoples' plant

knowledge has been appropriated, exploited or silenced.

I have made a series of printed calicos that tell the histories of various plant dyes especially for this exhibition. Calicos from India, made using plant dyes on cotton fabric, were a particularly popular commodity in Europe used for high fashion and furnishings. Indeed, they were so popular that during the 18th century many European countries introduced import bans to protect their local textile industries. These European textile industrialists then appropriated the Indian techniques to set up their own calico works. They used plant dyes imported from around the globe, such as indigo cultivated in the plantation system; and brazilwood and logwood from the rainforests of Central and South America. The printing factories employed early examples of division of labour and production lines, prefiguring industrial working patterns. Somewhat ironically, in many areas of Europe such as Scandinavia, Germany and Eastern Europe, these printed calicos became an important part of peasant regional costume in the form of headscarves, bonnets and aprons. Thus, these colonial, proto-industrial fabrics have become associated with rurality and national romanticism.

The calicos I have made for The MERL use plant pigments and dyes that have particularly resonant stories. For example, brazilwood, a tree that produces a red dye, and which gave the country of Brazil its name, shows us how extractive capitalism overseas was connected to the disciplining of the poor in Europe. The brazilwood trade was responsible for deforestation in the Amazon, and the exploitation of the Amerindians, while in Europe beggars and vagabonds were imprisoned and forced to rasp brazilwood for the dye and textile industry.

I have also retrieved folk knowledge of dye plants that was lost in the process of colonialism and extractive capitalism. As Silvia Federici has argued in her 2004 book *Caliban and the Witch*, the great witch hunts were a tool that served to suppress radical movements from the peasant class, and appropriate women's reproductive capacities by silencing their medicinal knowledge of plants. This tactic was then exported to the Americas to suppress indigenous knowledge through accusations of satanism and idolatry. In Europe, madder roots, which produce a red dye, were also used as an abortifacient, which became taboo, and over time they were instead said to "regulate the menses". Mayan blue,

a sacred indigo-based pigment made from the *ch'oj* plant, is an example of indigenous plant knowledge that was lost during the colonial period. The technique for making it has only recently been rediscovered, and now the Mayan artist Luis Manuel May Ku is making the pigment using *ch'oj* that he has cultivated from wild plants he found growing in his hometown, restoring its importance to contemporary Mayan culture.

I used these patterned calicos to tell these entwined histories in common (and not-in common) as there appear to be movements towards re-founding our relationship with dye plants. Indeed, the woad balls in The MERL collection were donated by Professor Phillip John, who used them as part of his research into the medieval woad vat for the SPINDIGO project (2000-04) – an EU-funded research project into the potential for introducing indigo-producing crops into European agriculture, in order to replace environmentally harmful synthetic indigo. If we are to return to using plant dyes for colour, it is important that it is done in a sustainable way, where the plants are seen as a part of the total community, and not merely a resource for extraction.

Josefin Vargö

A collection of sourdough starters and the stories behind them

Levande Arkivet

Early in 2011, I was exploring how food can create new relationships through knowledge-sharing and found the perfect catalyst in sourdough. I asked people to send me some of their sourdough starters alongside their stories and recipes. This became the start of the sourdough collection called *Levande Arkivet* (The Living Archive).

Once collected, I dried the starter, which keeps the sourdough lactobacilli bacteria at rest until it is woken up to bake with. Since then, the collection has grown, travelled the world and been activated through exhibitions and events, providing many people with the possibility of receiving packages of dried sourdough starters from the collection.

I'm interested in how we value a wild yeast culture that is entangled with personal stories, current social issues and a wider culinary historical context. With this in mind, each baker was also asked to describe the value of their starter, giving space for reflection on how time is valued. How do we quantify the labour, love and memories invested in the making and nurturing of a starter? The archive portrays the varied reactions to how bakers value their time and which factors of life are considered to be part of the process.

My Collaboration with Josefin Vargö
by Amanda Couch

Swedish artist and food experience designer Josefin Vargö and I quickly became wheat *copines* in June 2019. We first met at the London allotment of Andy Forbes, wheat guru and founder of Brockwell Bake, who brings ancient heritage wheat varieties from seed banks into cultivation. Josefin was visiting the UK for a Delfina Foundation Politics of Food residency, where she was experimenting with fermented foods, with a particular interest in grains. Taking her project *Levande Arkivet* (The Living Archive) as a starting point, Josefin began her residency by making a joint sourdough starter from the individual donations to experiment with. The joint starter and her wheat research led her to contact the Nottingham-based Small Food Bakery – well known in food circles for innovative reimagining of local food systems – with which she organised a workshop at the end of her residency. Josefin grew particularly interested in the YQ Wakelyns wheat

population created by the late Professor Martin Wolfe. She went on to cultivate YQ in plots in Markim and Fårö in Sweden, as well as gifting some of these subsequent harvests to *Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others)*, which I planted in the raised beds at The MERL during my sowing ceremony in April 2021.

When Josefin and I first bonded over our shared fascination with wheat at Andy's plot, both cooing over the flowering of Squareheads Master, Black Bearded Spelt and the furry ears of Velvet Chaff or Kent Old Hoary, I knew that we would work together. So when Catherine and I started to conceive of a commensal event as part of *The Commons...* we invited Josefin to collaborate on a Commons Feast. It was clear from the start that bread cultured by the sourdough commons under Josefin's custodianship of Levande Arkivet would be at the heart of our feast. Before the pandemic, our aim was to design a meal for around 200 people at the museum for the launch event in July 2020. Our initial plans were for bread to be made in collaboration with delegates as part of our contribution to the International Association of Agricultural Museums (AIMA) congress that The MERL was to be concurrently hosting. The dough forms would then be baked by the University of Reading's catering department, which would also collaborate with us to prepare dishes that reflected commons foods, sourcing ingredients from local, ethical and sustainable producers. Discovering that Josefin and I were both keen foragers, and believed in the sharing of this knowledge as a way to rekindle and disseminate knowledge of our food commons, also began to fuel our conversations and meal designs.

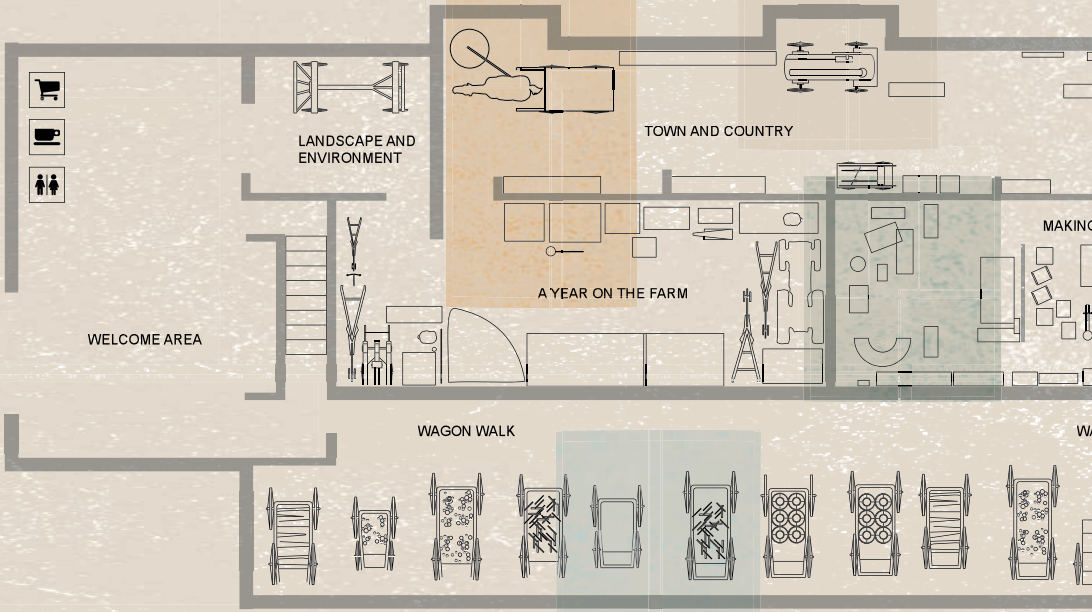
Gorse Flower Cordial

The INSTALLATIONS

Sam Wallman

Kelechi Anucha

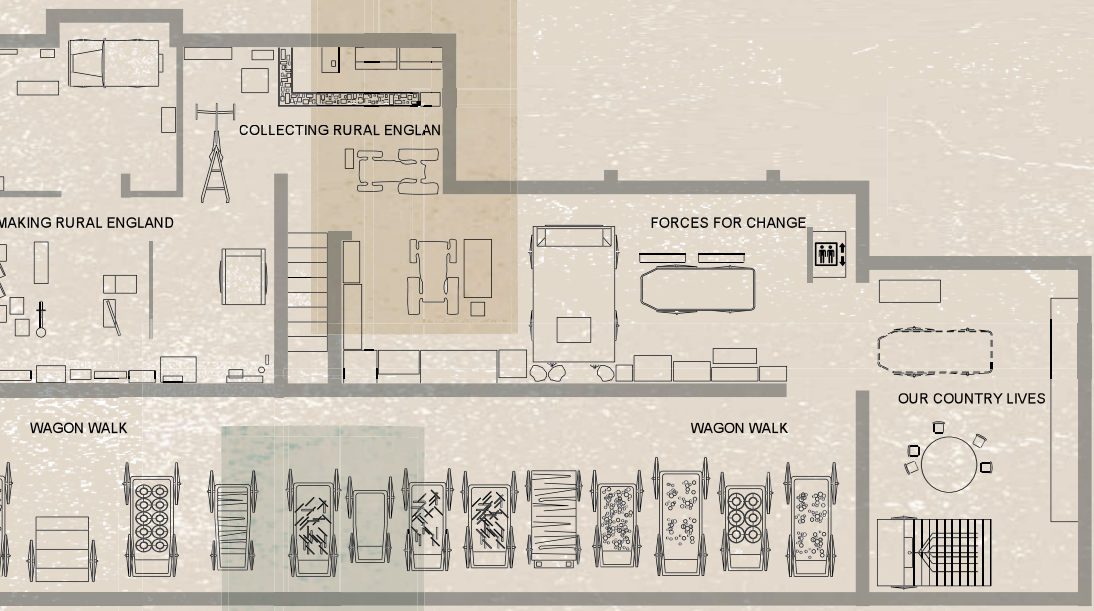
Carl Gent



Sigrid Holmwood

The MUSEUM of
ENGLISH RURAL LIFE

Amanda Couch



Catherine Morland

Kristen Fraser

The Commons
illustration
2021

27 July 2021 – 30 January

The commons defines th
share: land, air, and wate
cares for and preserves th
commons are enclosed, e
inaccessible the effects a
grave ecological changes
decline of communal life
turn, this can impact envir
gender rights, and the wag

Six artists with different re
have made installations fo
They focus on how the ma
challenges we now face lir
histories of property owne
of common land.

To find out more visit mer

or scan here ...

AMANDA COUC

CATHERINE MO

SIGRID HOLMW

SAM WALLMAN

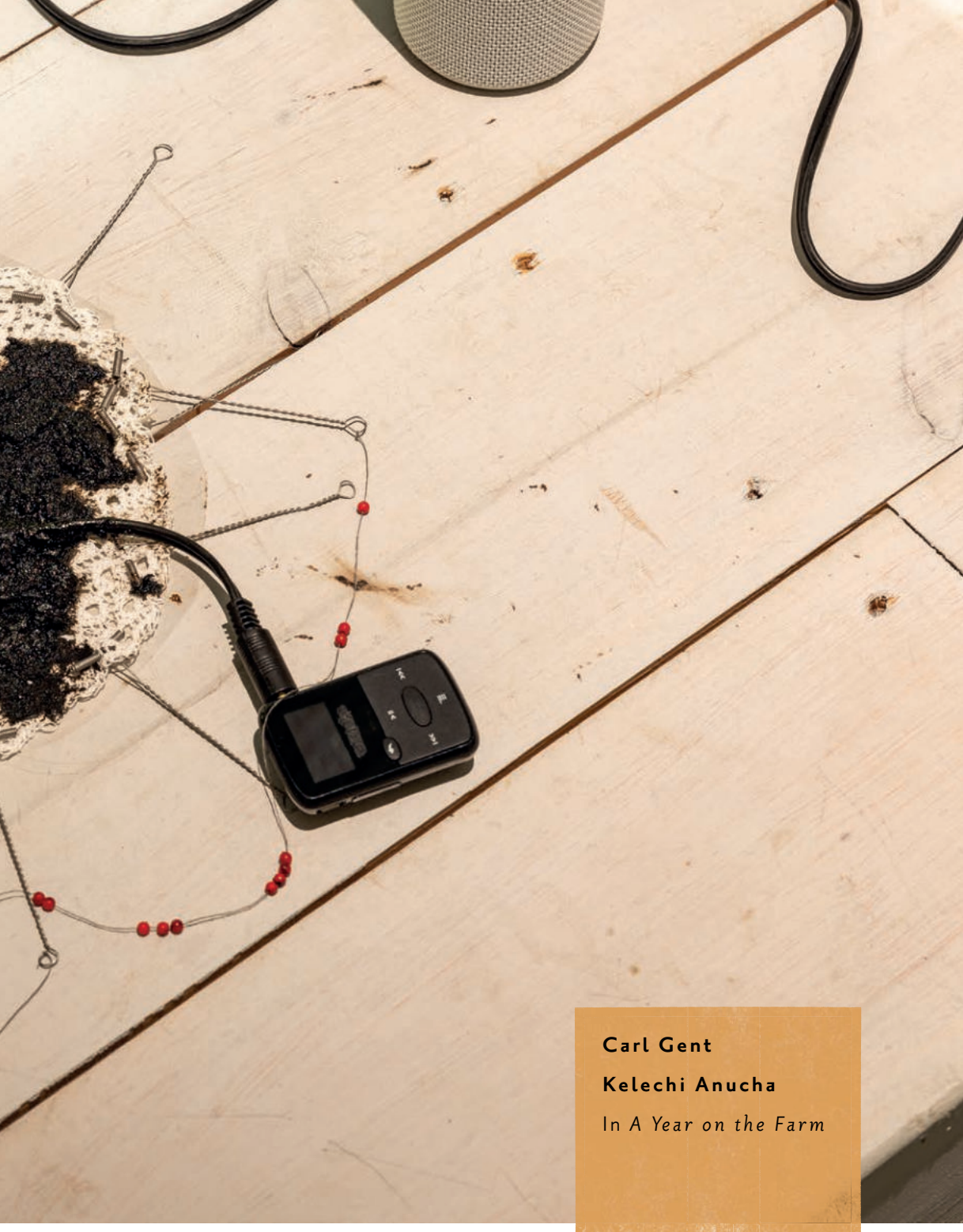
KELECHI ANUCH

CARL GENT

Sam Wallman

Reclaim The Commons banner, 2021
In *Town and Country*


SPIT OUT THE GRAVEL LOZENGE
REMOVE THE TOOTH FROM THE BRAIN
Reclaim the Commons!
BANHAM
SUBSCRIPTION
ENGINE
1839



Carl Gent

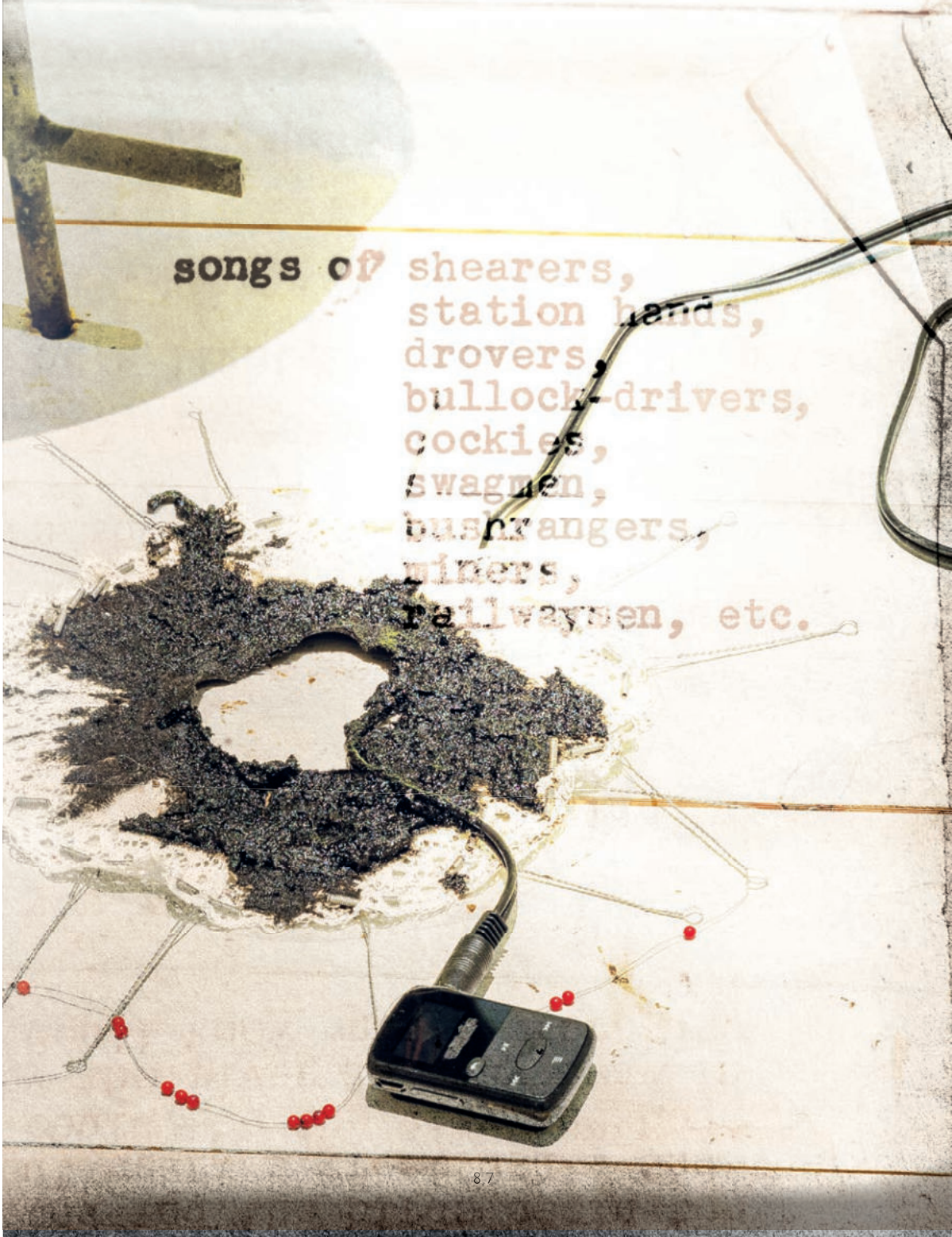
Kelechi Anucha

In *A Year on the Farm*

Last night I was a-married and on my marriage bed
There came a bold sea captain and he stood at my bed's head
Saying "Arise arise you brisk bonny lad and come along with me
To the cold cold coast of Greenland and the sperm whale fishery"

No shoe nor stocking I'll put on nor comb go in my hair
Nor broad daylight nor candle light shall in my room appear
Nor shall I wed with any young man until the day I die
Now the cold cold coast of Greenland has parted my love and I

Oh Greenland is a dreadful place, a place that's never green
It's too wild a habitation for a lover to be in
Where the icebergs grow and the whales do blow and the sunset's never seen
And the cold cold coast of Greenland lies between my love and me


songs of shearers,
station hands,
drovers,
bullock-drivers,
cockies,
swagmen,
bushrangers,
miners,
railwaymen, etc.

Fancies flee away! I'll fear not
what men say
I met a young lady, a-making her
mourn
Nor shall I lie with any young
man until the day I die

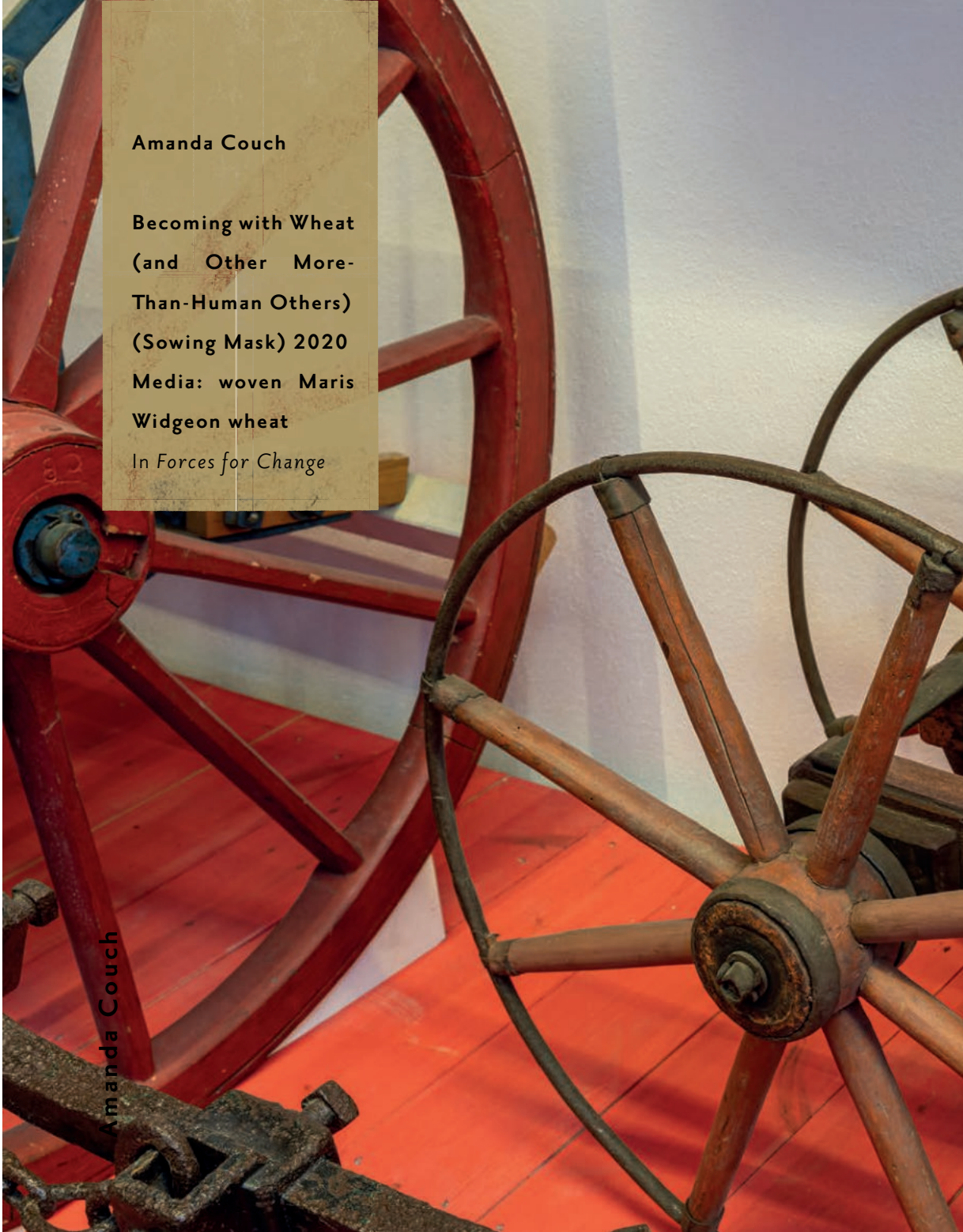

HARSH
REALITY

Catherine Morland

3 Vessels and a Ball of Cordage, 2021

In *Making Rural England*


Imagine a cosy country kitchen infused with
the smell of baking. These sugar cutters, spice
boxes and gingerbread moulds wouldn't look



Amanda Couch

Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others) (Sowing Mask) 2020
Media: woven Maris Widgeon wheat
In *Forces for Change*

Amanda Couch


MARSHALL THRASHER
THRESHING MACHINE — JOHN WILDER


TRACTION ENGINE, OR AGRICULTURAL LOCOMOTIVE,
BERKS


MODERN
MACHINERY
MACHINERY 100 YEARS AGO

Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others) Grain Spirit, 2021 (previous page right)
Media: anthotype with dandelion leaf emulsion on Somerset Satin 410gsm paper, with wooden support

Ongoing Performances of the World, 2018-2019/2021: Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others) (top page left)
Media: digital video and sound

Anthotype Process Display (bottom page left)
Media: anthotypes, transparent positives, frame, paint brush and sponge, glass rod, pestle and mortar, blender vessel, prepared papers, pressed plants, dandelion leaf emulsion


Edward Humphries thresher became common.
Contractors hauled them to farms, driving them
by steam engine. They fell out of use in the
mid-1900s as combine harvesters both cut and
threshed the grain.

Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others) (Harvesting Mask), 2019 (page left)
Media: woven Maris Widgeon wheat

Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others) (Sowing Mask), 2020 (above left)
Media: woven Maris Widgeon wheat

Becoming with Wheat (and Other More-Than-Human Others) Ritual Apron, 2020 (above right)
Media: digital print on cotton-linen

Catherine Morland

In the *Wagon Walk*


EDWARD C
CH BUILDI
ONING.

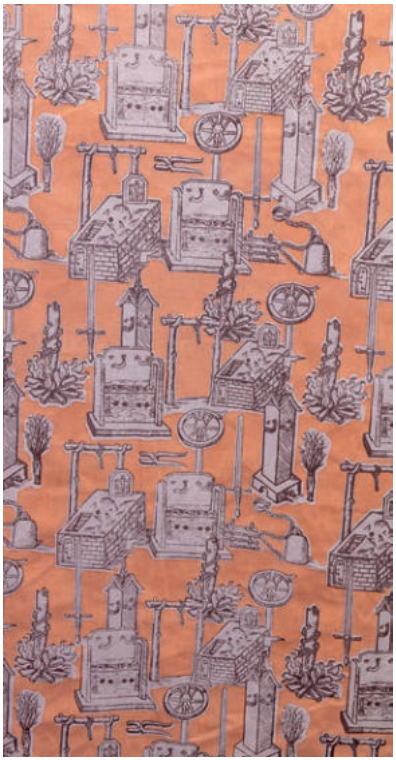
The Gathering 3 (Verbascum), 2021 (previous page left)

The Gathering 2 (Rush), 2021 (previous page right)

The Gathering 1 (Echium), 2021 (page left & next page)

Sigrid Holmwood

In the *Wagon Walk*



Woad, Ch'oj, and Chains (blue and red), 2021 (previous page right)

Cannibals and Witches, 2021 (page right)

Headscarf in Cannibal and Witches pattern, 2020 [top of case] (above left)

Woad leaves, balls and dyed wool (MERL 2018/33-37) [bottom of case] (above left)

Instruments of Torture, 2021 (above right)

Burning Books, 2021 (following page right)

Chopping and Rasping, 2020 (following page left)


SUFFOLK

The EVENTS

In February 2020, Amanda Couch instigated what Silvia Federici would call a "rurbanisation", an urban garden and "form of sociality that thrive[s] under the radar of money/market economy" with the Becoming with Wheat Companions.[1] Advertising through the Reading Food Growing Network, community gardens and allotments, a group first met in March 2020, just before the first UK national lockdown, sharing knowledge and deciding on aspects of the wheat planting. For example, the Companions chose re3grow, a locally sourced compost and example of closed loop recycling made from Reading residents' garden waste. Since May 2021 they have been meeting up monthly to share, care for and learn from each other and the wheat.

[1] Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, 2019, p. 108.

[2] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Penguin, 2013, p. 126.

"In a garden, food arises from partnership."[2]

"[Planting a garden] is good for the health of the earth and it's good for the health of people. A garden is a nursery for nurturing connection, the soil for cultivation of practical reverence. And its power goes beyond the garden gate – once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself."[3]

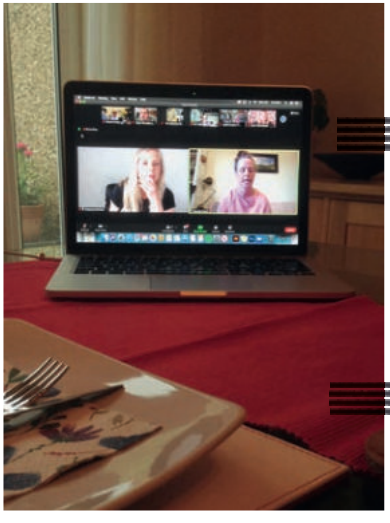
[3] Wall Kimmerer, op. cit., p. 126-27.

Catherine Morland planted seeds for a dedicated flowerbed in The MERL garden with the help of The MERL gardener Cathy Smith and a team of volunteers who tended to the bed during the growing season. In late summer 2021 the blooms of 10 hardy annuals were used as cut flowers for the table display at the Commons Feast event.

Woad Bed, planted for Sigrid Holmwood


Cornflower,
Marigold,
Orlaya grandiflora,
Ammi visnaga,
Scabiosa atropurpurea,
Phacelia tanacetifolia,
Sweet pea
and Hordeum.

The Virtual Launch and Virtual Commons Feast
Friday 30 July 2021 6pm-7.45pm
by Amanda Couch and Catherine Morland



This was the first event of our project. Covid had forced us to think differently. Our challenge was to show the work installed in the galleries, share our Commons Feast and present the themes and context of the project, all to a virtual audience. This meant we would have to be as creative as possible within the new remit of Zoom, particularly if we wanted to recreate sitting around a table, sharing food and drink and exchanging foraging stories. We started with a mixture of live and pre-recorded talks by the artists Catherine Morland, Carl Gent on behalf of their collaborative works with Kelechi Anucha, Sigrid Holmwood and Amanda Couch, as well as an introduction to *Levande Arkivet* (The Living Archive) by Josefin Vargö.

Next was a live tour with The MERL curator, Ollie Douglas, who expertly walked us through the museum galleries, showcasing works and making connections with the artifacts from the collection.
This was followed by The Commons Feast, a participatory performance meal carefully designed by Amanda Couch and Josefin Vargö. This was to be as interactive as possible to foster connectivity between members of the audience and create a collective experience. Before the event, participants had the opportunity to request a sourdough culture in advance from Vargö's *Levande Arkivet* of 80 sourdough cultures gifted from bakers around the world, to kickstart their own sourdough breadmaking. They were invited to bring food and drink made from foraged food to have with their bread.

Leading up to the feast, Vargö and Couch had been sharing their own experiments of foraged fare via Instagram. These included gorse cordial, dandelion and hawthorn recipes, wild garlic pesto, spruce tip syrup and elderflower champagne. The aim was to retrieve and revive our ancestral knowledge (particularly women's) to circumvent the mass industrial, commercialised food system.

Couch welcomed everybody to the virtual feast with an apéritif in hand, encouraging us to do the same. She shared a provocation evoking the flowers and berries of the hedgerow, taking us back to the Enclosure Acts and the years in between when a hedge of hawthorn may have offered food, fuel and medicine to generations of humans, and much-needed habitat and nutrition to a variety of more-than-human species.

The French word apéritif comes from the Latin verb aperire, which means "to open".

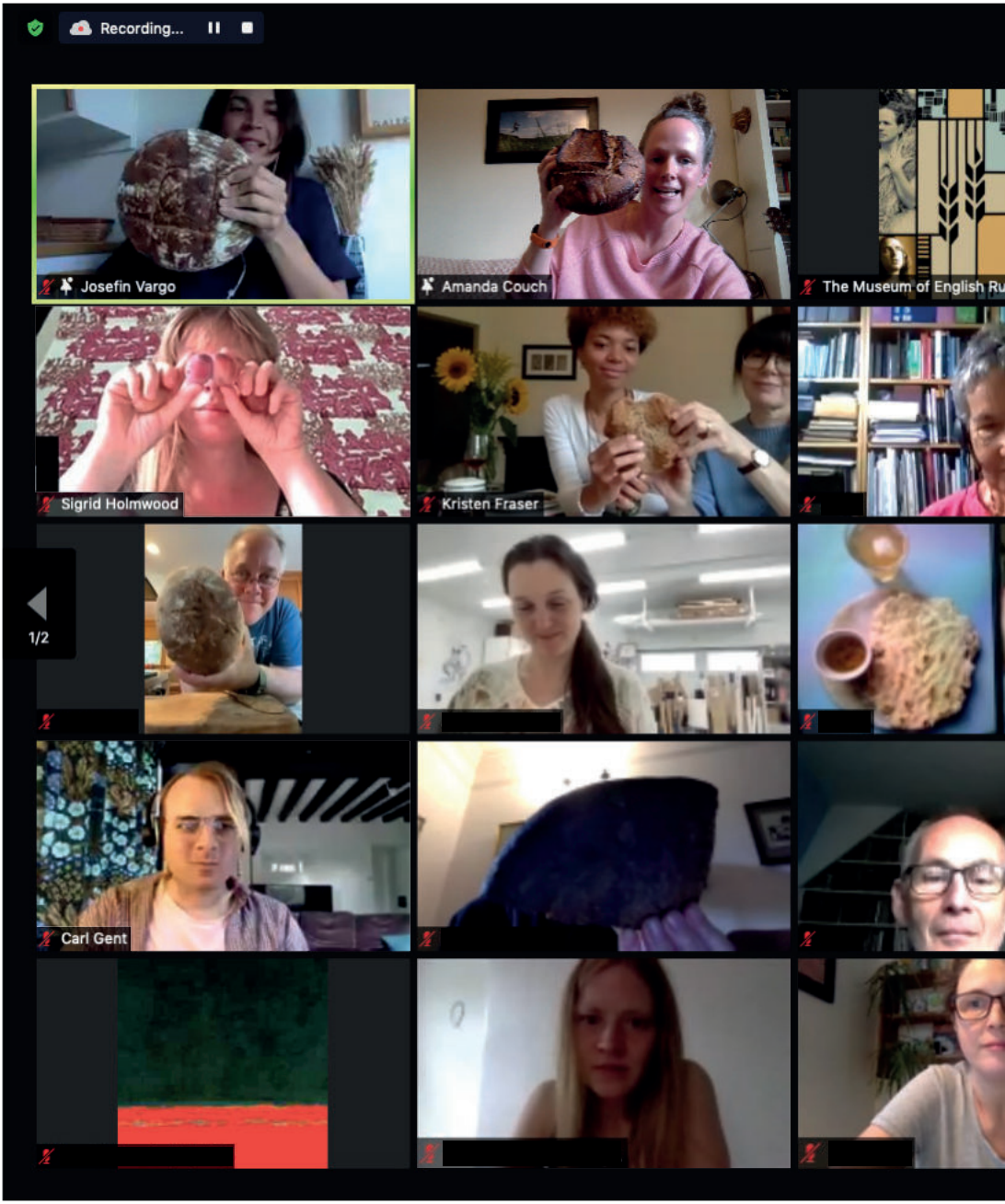
The apéritif is a drink that not only awakens the appetite prior to a meal, but also acts as a transition from the world of work to the personal realm, day into the evening. It traditionally contained bitter herbs to stimulate the appetite, which we might also employ here to arouse awareness of the historical context of our project. As well as the controversial "opening up" of society after the Covid lockdowns here in the UK, whilst sipping our apéritifs we might consider "openness" in opposition to the acts of enclosure, to privatisation and the fencing off of communal land, which, as we heard in the introduction, is the starting point of our project. (Amanda Couch at The Virtual Commons Feast)

Couch asked participants to turn on their cameras and lift their loaves for a collective portrait, and then enabled breakout rooms in Zoom where smaller groups gathered to share their food choices and experiences of gathering, making and tasting commons foods, all in lieu of congregating around a real-life table. We saw examples of nettle seed oatcakes, pickled walnut tapenade, wild garlic pesto, mulberry-infused chardonnay, rowan jelly atop some local cheese, as well as many examples of loaves leavened by *Levande Arkivet*.
Despite not being able to actually share each other's food, we engaged virtually in the breaking of bread, circulating stories of food-making whilst reviving the commons through knowledge-sharing, storytelling, and preparing and eating food.

"I ask these leeks to renew the bonds between this ground and my children, so that they will always carry the substance of home in the mineral of their bones."[1]

[1] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Penguin Books, 2020, p. 176.

Cherry Truluck's hawthorn and red clover cordial with a light rye flatbread


Recording...
Josefin Vargo
Amanda Couch
The Museum of English Ru
Sigrid Holmwood
Kristen Fraser
1/2
Carl Gent


View
ish Rural Life
Catherine Morland
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1/2
Oliver Douglas (The MERL)

The Commons Feast, 18 September 2021

The Commons Feast was part of Heritage Open Days, the largest free festival of history and culture in England. This was the first in-person event at The MERL for *The Commons* project and it took place entirely in The MERL garden. Each artist planned a demonstration or performance that connected to their practice and work inside the galleries.

Performing as her peasant painter persona, Sigrid Holmwood transformed woad grown in the museum garden into turquoise pigment, while Catherine Morland and her daughter Daisy Morland demonstrated how to make cordage using the materials used in her installations, including natural plant fibres and recycled plastic bags. Featuring the Becoming with Wheat Companions and the Mills Archive, Amanda Couch presented hands-on performances and shared information about threshing, winnowing, dehulling and milling using the wheat grown in The MERL garden. Sophie Haworth and Nathan Crawley Lyons of the locally based RISE Bakehouse came to demonstrate caring for and baking with a sourdough starter. These activities were accompanied by Carl Gent, who played their mixtapes of folksongs with handouts of lyrics that informed their collaborative work with Kelechi Anucha on display in the galleries. We also invited Reading Food Growing Network (RFGN), who hosted a Seed Swap, and Grow Beer Reading, who were signing up new hops growers. The MERL's Fong Scott ran a make-and-take Corn Dolly activity.

At the heart of the day was The Commons Feast, a gathering focused on shared food ideas about local, seasonal, wild and foraged fare. A large table setting was created in the middle of the garden for a festive display of bread and flowers. Loaves of white, wholemeal spelt and wholemeal rye sourdough had been made especially by RISE Bakehouse using flour from nearby Wessex Mill, which uses wheat grown locally around the mill. The sourdough cultures came from Josefin Vargö's *Levande Arkivet* (The Living Archive), her commons collection of 80 sourdough starters from around the world. The loaves were presented in a collection of breadbaskets made by members of the Basketmakers' Association especially for the project.

Flowers for the table display were grown from seed by Catherine Morland in the garden flower bed with the help of The MERL volunteer gardeners. Morland collaborated with artist Sara Trillo to make vessels and containers for the flowers out of foraged clay. These were arranged with the breadbaskets on a table with runners designed by Kristen Fraser, the project's designer.

BAD Cola and Elderflower Lemonade were provided by Company Drinks, a community drinks production enterprise who grow and pick all their ingredients in London, making links to the history of "going picking". Their aim is "to grow a community economy that puts social return before financial return".[1]

To accompany the bread and drinks, guests were invited to bring a selection of seasonal, preserved, wild, foraged or locally produced food and to discuss these choices with fellow visitors. Knowledge was shared about the abundance of nutritional wild foods that can bypass our commercial food system and should be accessible to all, independent of wealth. There were also conversations about local and ethical food producers, with questions raised about the increasingly dominant

extractive food model, aiming to promote structures that focus on locality, quality, ethical practices and sustainability.

Handouts were produced containing stories from *Levande Arkivet* and Sam Wallman's *Reclaim the Commons* banner, with recipes on the reverse for commons or hedgerow food from The MERL archives for our Recipe Swap. Also responding to the Heritage Open Days' theme, Edible England, participants were encouraged to bring and share their recipes relating to the commons (wild, foraged or hedgerow foods, land privatisation, identity, women's knowledge, knowledge inheritances, as well as recipes that have been passed down through families and communities).

Despite the increasing commodification of every aspect of our lives, including our food systems, recipes – part of our intangible cultural heritage – are examples of food commons. The act of exchanging recipes preserves this commons, keeping it vibrant and alive.

[1] Tweet by Adam Koszary, former head of digital at The MERL @AdamKoszary https://twitter.com/AdamKoszary/status/1439208694831632392


Janet Sampson
Catherine Morland
Jo Brook
John Page
Clair Murphy
Bunty Ball
Annette Mills
Kim Winter
Selena Chandler
Lois Walpole

Ten baskets were selected from a call out and were used to display the bread for The Commons Feast on 18 September 2021 and at The Commons: A Gathering on 31 March 2022.

Lois Walpole
All materials gathered/foraged from the beaches of Yell in Shetland.
A broken fragment of a float, and short lengths of braided rope (usually used for trawl nets), stitched with fine polypropylene that was unravelled from a finer net.

Bunty Ball
White willow and "brown" willow (bark on) that is home grown and has been steamed, which gives that variety, the colour of buff willow.

Annette Mills
"I have made a basket based on the looping technique. It is made from yellow flag iris (iris pseudacorus) leaves which grow on any waterlogged common land."

Selena Chandler
"Working with rush is unfamiliar to me, so in this basket I was playing with materials and weaves, enjoying the process and the outcome."

Janet Sampson
Simple willow bread basket with a wide border based on the Covent Garden fruit basket.

Jo Brook
Made with straw and willow.

John Page
Made from rush, harvested by Tony Handley in the Thames near Wantage. Twill base with twined siding.

Kim Winter
"In keeping with the commons theme, my basket was made from leaves I gathered from my garden and other spaces in London: cordyline, crocosmia, daylily and daffodils."

Clair Murphy
Made from rush.

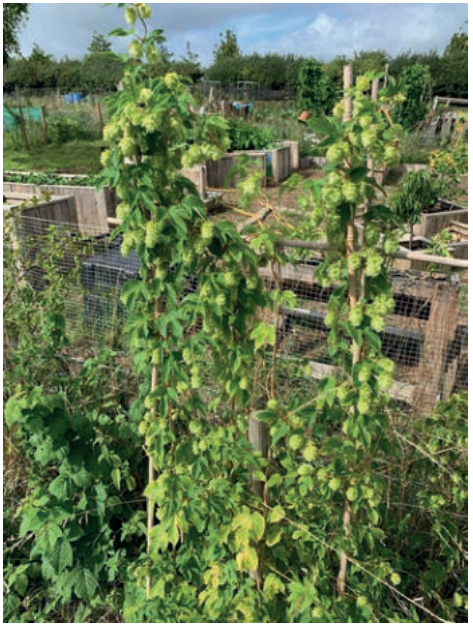
Catherine Morland
Made from rush based on a South American serving basket.

Grow Beer Reading
by Amanda Couch

We initiated Grow Beer Reading in February 2020 as a community "patchwork farm" with local people growing hops in their back gardens, on their patios and balconies, in allotments and community gardens, with the goal of growing, harvesting and brewing a beer to enjoy communally.

Grow Beer was started by Helen Steer and Ann Bodkin in Brixton, London, after a conversation over a pint of beer in October 2011, wanting to celebrate beer and grow stuff in a fun way. Utilising Steer and Bodkin's model and open-share resources, there are now over 22 groups across the UK who regularly grow beer.

Grow Beer Reading is now in its third season. Whilst we have lots of people successfully growing hops, owing to the Covid lockdowns the group has yet to reach the brewing stage. We hope that with the 2022 harvest we will collaborate with a brewer and the transformation into a green hops beer will happen.



Workshops by Lead Artists

During this hands-on workshop Catherine Morland explored the story of string and demonstrated how to make cordage with the materials used in her installations in The MERL galleries, including natural plant fibres and recycled plastic bags. Participants learnt how to make a cordage bracelet to take home with them.

Amanda Couch ran a workshop on 16 October 2021 exploring the Victorian non-toxic photographic process of the anthotype. Participants made plant emulsions from blackberry, cornflower, marigold and sea beet that were taken home to develop in sunlight. She also ran a condensed version for children of the Becoming with Wheat Companions in November.

Carl Gent, Dispersed Song

The majority of English folk songs have travelled across countries and contexts for centuries. As this passage occurs, verses are added, forgotten or tweaked. During this workshop, Carl Gent worked with a variety of English folk songs, asking visitors to create, perform and record new hybrid versions of a range of songs.

Contributors:

The day was introduced by Catherine Morland and Amanda Couch, who contextualised the project and summarised the events, which included a commons feast lunch. The afternoon began with a tour of the exhibition in the galleries by artists Carl Gent, Amanda Couch, Sigrid Holmwood and Catherine Morland.

Karl Fitzgerald, economist and director of advocacy at Prosper Australia, joined us online from Melbourne to discuss the importance of protecting our commons by economic means. The Earth urgently needs a system to slow down the economic framework so that land, housing and natural monopolies rebalance back towards their earning potential, rather than the hyper-profiteering speculators have enjoyed in recent decades. A giant renewable resource that sits at the heart of society has been ignored, leading to great profit for some alongside a lifetime of precarity for others.

Leah Gordon, artist/curator, and ***Annabel Edwards***, writer/researcher, came in person to The MERL and discussed their exploration of the Enclosure Acts. Their project started from a belief that a deeper understanding of the Enclosure Acts, along with the industrial revolution and the American and Caribbean plantation system, is vital to having a critical understanding of the systems and politics that we inhabit now. In their project *THE COMMONERS* they made contact with people that still had common rights over land, discovered how they exercise these rights, photographed commoners in the common lands and interviewed them to hear more about their personal stories and commoners' status.

Sheila Ghelani, an artist of Indian/English mixed heritage, who has a socially engaged and performance-based practice, talked about her *Rambles with Nature* series – a body of collaborative artworks begun in 2013 – and traced a line through to *Common Salt*, her "show and tell" performance made with artist Sue Palmer. The performance explores the colonial, geographical and natural history of England and India, from the first Enclosure Act and the start of the East India Company in the 1600s to 21st-century narratives of trade, empire and memory.

Carmen Wong, artist/researcher, shared a vocalisation experiment online for her contribution to the symposium, to explore how the audience narrate what they value/extract, what our ideas and language around giving and receiving sound like for each of us, and how to move into sounding our needs out loud. Wong, who describes herself as "a recovering academic with student debt" often experiments in her practice with deep listening, somatic practice and food for convivial collectivism.

JC Niala, historian and doctoral researcher at St Catherine's College, Oxford, was unable to join us on the day. On her behalf Amanda Couch presented aspects of JC Niala's 1918 Allotment – which took place on Fig's Elder Stubbs Allotment in Oxford – via the online exhibition on The MERL website, which shares images and reflections from the resultant book, *Portal: 1918 Allotment*. Designed by Julia Utreras and published by Fig, this documents the project through poems, journal entries and images, and poses the question: how do you document what happens on a piece of land over a growing season, while recognising the history that made it possible for people to be growing on that same piece of land for over a century?

Michael Smythe, artist and urban farmer, came in person to the symposium. He is creative director of Nomad Projects, an independent arts foundation that develops experimental projects across digital and location-specific spaces. He talked to us about Phytology, an urban physic garden and research institute in Bethnal Green, and discussed interspecies collaboration, economics and community activism.

Nick Hayes, illustrator, printmaker and author, joined us in person at The MERL. He talked about *The Book of Trespass*, which tells the story of how the English were divorced from nature via the barbed wire of exclusive ownership. He also discussed the Right to Roam campaign, which seeks to redress this injustice, at least in part, by introducing rights of access that supersede the right of large estates to exclude the public from the nature they so badly need.

Conclusion
by Amanda Couch and Catherine Morland

We had to postpone the start of *The Commons* project because of the onset of the Covid pandemic. Looking back this was a kind of gift: it gave us more time to make the work for the exhibition and develop relationships with our creative commoners. Moreover, the world looks like a different place because of the pandemic. After the initial fear and apprehension around the restrictions and lockdowns, people started to think very differently about each other and the world around them. Initially we were going through the crisis together. There was a solidarity about wearing masks, protecting the vulnerable and looking after our neighbours. We found that instead of struggling to explain the commons and commoning when talking about the project, it was something people started thinking about almost without realising it. Green spaces became something to cherish and look after. We started to value overlooked members of our society and share resources with those in need. This way of being must have been similar to the way the commons for 18th-century peasants was not just a resource but a social space for care. Whether this way of thinking will be fully assimilated into our lives after the pandemic remains to be seen.

In *The Commons: Re-enchanting the World*, we explicitly pay homage to the title, ethos and vision of Silvia Federici's 2019 book *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Federici does not advocate "an impossible return to the past".[1] She urges us to reflect on the knowledges and practices of our ancestors to claim, salvage and make reparations, to enable us to mutually look to the future, in order that we "recover the power of collectively deciding our fate on this earth". She looks ahead to "a new world, re-enchanted".[2]

Our embracing of craft knowledge, of fashioning cordage, fusing dyes, breeding images, weaving objects, gathering relations and rekindling ballads through our commoning with technologies, people, plants, minerals, foods, songs, memories and actions become catalysts for renewal. This knowledge isn't inherited or excavated, but passed forward: a process of giving to the future rather than

taking from the past. Perpetuating this continuity is a deliberate act of sowing, a seeding that yields a rich harvest of learning for the future.

Finally, we might invite Robin Wall Kimmerer in her wonderful book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* to join the conversation. She asserts that:

> *For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one.*[3]

And that is what we bid you to do. We hope that you take our project, our provocations and reflections, works and practices, and this part-new, part-old story and share it.
Disperse these seeds of wisdom on your own winds, gifting them to your friends, families, colleagues and communities, to reseed the world.

[1] Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, 2019, p. 8.

[2] Peter Linebaugh in the foreword to Silvia Federici, op. cit., p. xiii.

[3] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Penguin Books, 2020, p. 31.

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