

Anna Bak
Hermit

26.01 – 17.03 2019



CV

Anna Bak (b. 1985) graduated from the Funen Art Academy in 2012. In 2014 she was granted a residency at the post-academic research institute Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. In Denmark she has exhibited at art institutions like GL STRAND in Copenhagen, Kunsthall NORD in Aalborg, and the House of Art and Design in Holstebro – and internationally at Museum Het Valkhof in Nijmegen, Studio 47 in Amsterdam, and Glucksman Gallery in Cork. In 2015 she launched the book *Wilderness Survival – A Guide to the Aesthetics of Survivalism*, published by the Dutch publisher and exhibition space Onomatopee.

EVENTS

Thursday 7 February 6-7pm

WALK'N'TALK

This evening you can experience cultural researcher and art critic Torben Sangild in conversation with Anna Bak. Together they will take you through the exhibition and talk about key themes in the works and the artists' practice in general.

Friday 8 March 5.30-7pm

CONCERT & PERFORMANCE

On the occasion of the International Women's Day the award winning female vocal group IKI will perform in Anna Bak's exhibition. The group is known for its mystical, trance-like and hypnotic universe that relates to the themes in the exhibition revolving around changes in the human state of mind when affected by isolation and retreat into nature. In connection with the concert Anna Bak will give a performance that activates some of the exhibited works.

THANK YOU

Anna Bak would like to thank Rita Lund & Hjort Knudsen, Per Bak, Kiki Atmosfär, Jullie Hjetland & IKI, Ida Øhren, Mette Nisgaard Larsen, Nadja Touzari, Elna Christiansen, and Jonas Falk.

Image: Anna Bak, *From the Moss*, 2018. Photograph.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: overgaden.org

The exhibition is supported by:



Knud Højgaard's Fond Ragnvald og Ida Blix' Fond

Overgaden is supported by the Danish Arts Foundation and the Obel Family Foundation

OVERGADEN.

Institute of Contemporary Art, Overgaden neden Vandet 17, 1414 Copenhagen K, Denmark, overgaden.org, +45 32577273

Design: Anni's

In the Deep Dark Woods

By Pernille Lystlund Matzen

In 2013 the American recluse Christopher Thomas Knight was unwillingly discovered after living for twenty-seven years as a hermit in the woods of Maine in the far northernmost part of the US. Knight lived within miles of other woodland cabins, but had no contact with anyone else during the almost three decades he was there. He survived by stealing food and other essentials from cabins and camping grounds nearby. In an interview, the reserved, long-bearded man described his isolation in the forest:

“Solitude did increase my perception. But here’s the tricky thing – when I applied my increased perception to myself, I lost my identity. With no audience, no one to perform for, I was just there. There was no need to define myself; I became irrelevant. The moon was the minute hand, the seasons the hour hand. I didn’t even have a name. I never felt lonely. To put it romantically: I was completely free.”¹

Knight’s words feed into archetypical fantasies of a secluded life in nature generating self-insight and authentic perception, but he differs from other famous and unknown recluses in never having had any intention of returning to civilisation. He had no desire to either document or tell the rest of humanity about his insights: all he wanted was to live a life of solitude. Herein lies the paradox, like a philosophical Fata Morgana of nature, since any genuine retreat into nature means not being able to pass on the insights gained. In the absence of other voices you might suddenly be able to hear your own, but not to share it with anyone else.

THE HERMIT

The background for *Hermit* is an artistic experiment conducted in the summer of 2018 when Anna Bak isolated herself in a cabin in the woods north of Gothenburg in Sweden without any form of contact with the outside world. During the experiment she produced a series of works including drawings, a video, textile prints and casts in clay documenting her time in the woods. These are the works presented in the exhibition, works in which the artist uses herself as a basis to investigate the psychological impact of isolation on the production of art and creative thinking.

The experiment is an extension of Bak’s long-standing fascination with people who have an existential mission with nature: the hermits, recluses and ‘preppers’ who share the same partiality for empty, untamed landscapes. In the early work *Cabin* (2012), Bak built a woodland hut based on the striking visual resemblance between the cabins of two recluses. The first was the writer Henry David Thoreau, who wrote on life

in solitary commune with nature as an enlightenment project in his famous autobiography *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). The second was the terrorist Ted Kaczynski, who sent letter bombs to individuals and organisations he held responsible for what he saw as the destructive technological development of society. It is in this paradoxical field of tension between nostalgia and utopianism, genius and insanity, insight and delusion, and retreat and staging the self that we find Anna Bak’s artistic project *Hermit*, where for the first time in using the recluse to explore our conflicted relationship to nature she turns her investigative gaze inwards.

Every day during her month of exile in the woods Anna Bak made a drawing of herself and of a tree close to her cabin. In *Hermit* these drawings are printed on two banners of fabric hanging on either side of a winding passageway: artist and tree, subject and object face to face. The simple drawings are strikingly different in mood and style, like a visual seismograph where the outer transformations on paper can be read as expressing shifts within the artist herself. Some of the drawings seem spontaneous and intimate in their familiarity with what they portray, whereas others are distanced, almost affected: faces staring glassily back at us from the paper. Bak has said that during her time in the woods she experienced a recurring paranoid inner voice incessantly repeating the words “ ... you are ruthless, you are ruthless, you are ruthless, you are ruthless ... “. Does the absence of outer voices make it easier for us to listen to ourselves, or is isolation more of an abyss? Is our ‘inner voice’ the voice of reason, or does it get lost in the tortuous spirals and echo chambers of the mind? The frieze of drawings reflect both the timespan of the experiment, as well as the psychological states and emotions the artist went through while isolated in the woods.

AUTHENTICITY

Historically there are numerous examples of artists who have isolated themselves from the outside world to make ‘purer’ art. Just as with the hermit, throughout art history there has been a highly mythologised idea of the secluded artist minimising outer distractions to create works from unadulterated, authentic inspiration.

In the 19th century the German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant developed a concept of the sublime based on authenticity rooted in solitary commune with nature, something that was highly resonant at the time – not least among artists. Paintings by Caspar David Friedrich, William Turner and Carl Julius von Leypold often depict alter egos who have turned their backs on civilisation and ventured into nature alone. In

Kant’s concept of the sublime, reason is overwhelmed by the experience of awe at the power of nature – an erupting volcano, a thundering waterfall, or endless expanses of landscape – bringing us into contact with the transcendental: animated nature. Interestingly, this philosophical concept of nature as the source of divine insight emerged at the precise historical juncture when industrialisation and urbanisation were accelerating and widening the gap between people and nature in the West. Later, the same idea of the link between authenticity and creative originality resurfaced with the artists of the 20th-century avant-garde and their cultivation of masks, rituals and primitivism.

In the exhibition *Hermit* it is these ideas about nature and isolation as the primeval setting for artistic authenticity that Anna Bak experiments and plays with. In a video combining documentation with staged footage from the forest, she appears with three mythical figures (all versions of the artist herself) in a form of shamanistic ritual. One after the other the figures enter a tipi, where they sit in a circle and bow to a series of totems laid out in the middle in communal prayer. All three mythical figures in the video wear a mask made of materials from the surrounding nature. Fungi, fir cones and strips of bark form the different faces, and moss and long, plaited pieces of straw each individual crop of hair. The masks seem to fuse the inner and outer world, embodying the interrelationship between the mind of the artist and nature as they transform each other. The entire scenario is both sincere and theatrical; a personal, shamanistic rite of passage, at the same time as an ironic commentary on the very idea of any pact between artist and nature. The eerie masks and reiterated rituals also imply an almost, pathological compulsive urge, pointing to the darker sides of artistic isolation.

SIMPLE LIVING

Seeking meaning in nature is far from confined to artists and hermits. During recent years the idea of a simpler, more authentic way of life has seen a revival in many parts of the West. As TV series on self-sufficiency and survivalism fill the airwaves with people living in harmony with nature, social media abound with photos of people plucking mushrooms, fishing, camping and traveling the Camino de Santiago on foot. The question is whether the revival of interest in nature should be seen as a kind of nostalgic longing for a time *before* the complexity of modern existence, or a necessary and realistic endeavour to find more environmentally and socially sustainable ways of living. Maybe late capitalism and the digital economy’s exhausting demands for self-optimisation and social

marketing has created a greater need for withdrawal and isolation in nature – which only makes it even more paradoxical that such attempts to live in greater harmony with nature are often displayed on the very digital media they are allegedly a backlash against.

Nowhere is this irony greater than in the computer game *Walden: A Game*, which was launched in 2017 to celebrate the bicentenary of Thoreau’s birth under the slogan “What if we could all go to the woods to live deliberately?”. In the game players can wander through Thoreau’s surroundings on Walden Pond seeking spiritual retreat and inspiration in nature – in its digital form, that is. Maybe humans are basically social animals who find it difficult to drag ourselves away from the manmade structures, conditions and temptations that surround us? Even a hardcore recluse like Christopher Thomas Knight who tried to live in total isolation could not resist the temptation to steal a bar of chocolate, a burger, or a good book now and then.

Pernille Lystlund Matzen is a cultural critic and co-editor of the journal Skuelyst.

Translation: Jane Rowley

1. Finkel, Michael, “The Strange and Curious Tale of the Last True Hermit”, *GQ Magazine*, August 4th 2014.