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Folklore in Contemporary Performance: Intertextual and Intermedial Negotiations in the Baltic-Nordic Context

Folklora laikmetīgajā performances mākslā: intertekstuālie un intermediālie saskares punkti Baltijas un Ziemeļvalstu kontekstā

Summary   This article examines how contemporary performance artists in the Baltic–Nordic region reinterpret folklore through cultural memory, myth-making, and embodied storytelling. It focuses on three case studies: Simona Orinska's *Bearman* (2018), Anna Maskava's *Ancestral Body* (2024–2025), and the collaborative performances by Katri Kainulainen and Maximilian Latva (2018–ongoing). Drawing on approaches from performance studies, folklore research, and cultural memory theory, the analysis explores how ritual motifs, mythic figures, and symbolic objects are mobilized as sites of negotiation between tradition and contemporaneity. Orinska reconfigures the bear ritual as a liminal and intercultural performance; Maskava transforms mythic archetypes through feminist and ecological perspectives; while Kainulainen and Latva employ shamanic symbolism and puppetry to address trauma and collective memory. These practices demonstrate that folklore, far from being a static cultural legacy, functions as a dynamic and politically charged field of re-signification, continually reactivated through embodied and intermedial performance. By situating these artworks within the broader Baltic–Nordic context, the study argues that performance art sustains folklore's cultural relevance and symbolic agency, transforming it into a living medium for reimagining authenticity, identity, and belonging.

Kopsavilkums   Rakstā analizēts, kā mūsdienu performances mākslinieki Baltijas–Ziemeļvalstu reģionā interpretē folkloru kultūras atmiņas, mitoloģijas un iemiesota stāstījuma formā. Pētījumā aplūkoti trīs gadījumi: Simonas Orinskas *Lāčuvīrs* (2018), Annas Maskavas *Senču ķermenis* (2024–2025) un Katrī Kainulai-nenas un Maksimiliana Latvas kolaboratīvās performances (2018–šobrīd). Balsto-ties performances studijās, folkloristikā un kultūras atmiņas teorijā, rakstā pētīts, kā rituālie motīvi, mītiskie tēli un simboliski priekšmeti tiek izmantoti kā instrumenti dialogā starp tradīciju un mūsdienām. Orinska pievēršas lāča tēlam un rada liminālu starpkultūru rituālu; Maskava transformē mītiskos arhetipus, uzsverot feminisma un ekoloģijas aspektus; savukārt Kainulainena un Latva izmanto šamanisko simbo-liku un lelles, lai reflektētu par traumu un kolektīvo atmiņu. Šie darbi apliecina, ka folklora funkcionē kā dinamisks un politiski piesātināts diskursīvs lauks, ko perfor-mances mākslinieki pastāvīgi dekonstruē. Apskatot šos mākslas darbus plašākā Baltijas–Ziemeļvalstu kontekstā, pētījums atklāj, ka performances māksla saglabā saikni ar folkloras kultūrvēsturisko un simbolisko aģenci, transformējot to par dzīvās mākslas mediju, lai kritiski izvaicātu tādus jēdzienus kā autentiskums, identitāte un piederība.

Introduction   Across the Baltic Sea region, artists increasingly turn to folklore as a resource for contemporary performance. This tendency is not accidental: folklore, with its repertoire of myths, songs, rituals, and symbolic figures, constitutes a living archive of cultural memory. Performance art, in turn, thrives on presence, process, and transformation. When these two domains converge, the result is not a simple citation of tradition but a reactivation of cultural narratives within new artistic and sociopolitical frameworks.

Yet despite the richness of these connections, scholarship remains fragmented. Studies of Baltic and Nordic performance art often overlook the role of folklore, while folkloristics has paid relatively little attention to how traditions are appropriated, mediated, and transformed by contemporary artists.[1] Recent scholarship has emphasized that folklore should be seen as a dynamic field structured by overlapping discourses of heritage, education, and identity (Ķencis 2015; 2025). Similarly, Digne Ūdre-Lielbārde (2025) has shown how the folklore revival in Soviet Latvia functioned as cultural opposition, mobilizing symbols as tools of resistance. These insights provide a crucial backdrop for understanding contemporary practices that likewise treat folklore as contested and politically charged.

This article seeks to address the gap by analyzing how contemporary performance artists in Latvia and Finland mobilize folkloric material as a form of embodied cultural memory and a vehicle of radical aesthetics.

The analysis unfolds through three interrelated theoretical lenses: cultural memory, which conceptualizes folklore as a process of preservation and transformation; intertextuality and intermediality, which explain how folkloric motifs circulate and persist through performance and its documentation; and radical aesthetics, which frame performance as a transgressive practice that exposes the cultural and political tensions of its time. Drawing on case studies of Simona Orinska's *Bearman* (Latvia, 2018), Anna Maskava's *Ancestral Body* (Latvia, 2024–2025), and Katri Kainulainen & Maximilian Latva's collaborative performances (Finland, 2018–ongoing), the article situates performance art as a contemporary site where folklore's embodied, symbolic, and affective dimensions are reactivated and redefined. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on how artistic practices sustain, mediate, and transform collective memory in Northern Europe.

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1   Currently, the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art is carrying out the research project "Contemporary Art and Folklore: Unlocking the Underworld" (2025-2027). For more details, see: https://lulfmi.lv/en/research/projects/contemporary-art-and-folklore-unlocking-the-under-world-unart-1

Theoretical Framework   The relationship between folklore and performance art is conceptually complex, requiring careful definition of terms and frameworks. In this article, folklore is understood through the lens of cultural memory, performance – through ritual and embodiment, and their intersection – as a space of symbolic negotiation. To avoid conceptual vagueness, this section situates the study in dialogue with folkloristics, performance studies, and memory studies, while refining how terms such as *myth*, *ritual*, and *collective memory* are deployed. These perspectives together illuminate how folklore operates as a dynamic system of embodied communication reactivated through contemporary performance art.

Folklore is not a singular or static category but a constellation of practices that preserve, reinterpret, and transmit cultural meaning. As Toms Ķencis notes, folklore in the Baltic region has historically been instrumentalized in nation-building, yet its role cannot be reduced to nationalist ideology alone. In his article on authenticity in Soviet Latvia, Ķencis describes folklore as a social field:

> The folklore field is structured by historical institutions, managed by various organizations, and inhabited by different agents actively pursuing their agendas. It is articulated within overlapping and often conflicting discourses of education, representation, legitimation, cultural heritage, and national identity (Ķencis 2024: 33).

This perspective reinforces the view of folklore as a dynamic communicative practice: at once everyday and ritualized, oral and embodied, communal and adaptive. Such a view aligns with the modern folkloristic turn that redefined folklore as a form of expressive and performative behavior.[2]

Alan Dundes's insistence that folklore is "something alive and dynamic" rather than "dead and static" (Dundes 1975: xi–xii) marked a decisive move away from the archival and antiquarian models of earlier folklore studies. He argued that the meaning of folklore must be contextualized within social and behavioral conditions, viewing it as a form of sublimation – a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of otherwise prohibited or anxiety-inducing behavior. For Dundes, folklore thus operates as a cultural safety valve, enabling the articulation of taboo and desire in symbolic form.

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2   Indeed, "by the late 1980s, the confluence of Richard Bauman and Barbara Myerhoff with work in sociology (C. L. R. James, James Scott), anthropology (James Clifford, James Fernandez, Renato Rosaldo, Michael Taussig, Victor Turner), folklore (Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock), critical cultural studies/theory (Frantz Fanon, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida), linguistics (J. L. Austin), theatre studies (Richard Schechner), and performance studies (Dwight Conquergood, Kristin Langellier, and Eric Peterson) was making a crashing wave of what has been called a 'performative turn'" (Pollock 2008: 121).

Richard Bauman advanced this behavioral redefinition by introducing performance as the central paradigm for understanding folklore. In his classic essay *Verbal Art as Performance*, Bauman proposed that folklore should not be understood merely as a collection of texts but as artistic action – "the appropriate mode of viewing verbal art as performance" (Bauman 1975: 290). Performance, he argued, is "a mode of speaking, a way of displaying communicative competence" that situates performer and audience within a shared social frame (Bauman 1975: 293). Meaning thus arises in the performative encounter itself, through contextual, aesthetic, and relational dynamics.

Simon J. Bronner extends these insights by stressing folklore's psychological and cultural functions. He writes:

> Folklore holds psychological and cultural significance because, as an open momentary and a socially sanctioned outlet of expression, it uses symbols in elaborated narratives and in rituals to encapsulate (or intensify) experience and provide a release from reality. Folkloric evidence is different from historical documentation because it often constitutes fantasy, but that does not detract from its truthfulness or significance (Bronner 2007: 3).

Together, Dundes, Bauman, and Bronner conceptualize folklore as a performative and affective system of meaning-making, where expressive acts give shape to collective values, anxieties, and aspirations. These ideas resonate strongly with performance art, which similarly operates through embodied communication and symbolic transformation.

While folklore often incorporates spiritual or animistic dimensions, it is important to avoid conflating it with shamanism. Margaret Stutley, in her work on Eurasian shamanic traditions, identifies three core features shared across shamanic systems: belief in a spirit world, the induction of trance through ecstatic ritual, and healing through spiritual mediation (Stutley 2003: 2). Shamanism may intersect with folklore in ritual and cosmological structures but extends beyond it as a religious system. In this article, therefore, *folklore* is used in a broad yet historically grounded sense: encompassing narrative, ritual, and symbolic practices circulating in Baltic and Nordic contexts, while acknowledging their porous boundaries with shamanic cosmologies.

Cultural memory theory provides a second foundational framework for understanding folklore as a process of both preservation and transformation. Jan Assmann defines cultural memory as "that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image" (Assmann 1995: 132). This is how folklore functions as a medium of cultural memory: it condenses collective experience into symbolic forms that persist across generations.

Yet, as Astrid Erll argues, memory must also be approached through its medial

dimension. Media act, in her words, as "a kind of switchboard at work between the individual and collective dimensions of remembering" (Erll 2011: 113). She further explains that "the images of the past which circulate in memory culture are not extrinsic to media. They are media constructs. This does not make them counterfeit or unreal; mediality represents instead the very condition for the emergence of cultural memory" (Erll 2011: 114).

This theoretical insight is crucial for performance art, where embodiment, documentation, and technological mediation all participate in the production of memory. Folklore and performance share this structural dependence on repetition and reactivation: both rely on embodied acts that preserve and transform collective knowledge. If cultural memory provides the *temporal continuity* of folklore, performance provides its embodied renewal – the moment in which the past is made present through action.

Performance studies provides the next conceptual axis, offering tools for understanding how embodied acts transmit and transform cultural meaning. Richard Schechner's notion of *restored behavior* underscores that performance is never entirely new but composed of fragments of prior actions that can be recombined and recontextualized. As he explains,

> Restored behavior is used in all kinds of performances from shamanism and exorcism to trance, from ritual to aesthetic dance and theater, from initiation rites to social dramas, from psychoanalysis to psychodrama and transactional analysis. [..] Because the behavior is separate from those who are behaving, the behavior can be stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed (Schechner 1985: 35–36).

Performance thus functions as a system of embodied repetition and transformation, where cultural gestures acquire new meanings in different contexts. Victor Turner's concept of liminality complements this view, describing ritual as a threshold state that suspends ordinary structures and enables transformation:

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols (Turner 1969: 94).

Liminality marks the space of transition – both social and symbolic – where inherited behaviors are reconfigured and meanings renewed. Latvian performance art offers vivid examples of this process. As Laine Kristberga observes, Latvian performance often operates as "a testing ground for liminal practice," foregrounding hybridity, ritual, and embodied presence as strategies that destabilize conventional boundaries between art and life (Kristberga 2019: 88–89). In Simona Orinska's *Bearman*, for instance, liminality manifests through the palimpsestic layering of Latvian, Sámi, and Japanese traditions, staging transformation as both cultural and

corporeal. These practices exemplify Schechner's and Turner's insights: performance as a liminal process of restoration, reactivation, and renewal.

To further understand how folklore and performance intersect as dynamic systems of meaning-making, this study adopts intertextuality and intermediality as complementary frameworks. Julia Kristeva defined intertextuality as the principle that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 1986 [1967]: 37). Richard Bauman extended this concept to oral traditions, describing intertextuality as "the relational orientation of a text to other texts" (Bauman 2004: 2).

While these formulations illuminate how folklore circulates through citation, allusion, and transformation, performance cannot be reduced to text. Peggy Phelan's claim that "performance's only life is in the present" (Phelan 1993: 146) underscores its ephemerality, but later scholars have shown that performance also persists through mediation. Philip Auslander argues that "performance and its documentation are not ontologically distinct but mutually implicated" (Auslander 2006: 5), while Rebecca Schneider (2011) demonstrates that performance "remains" through acts of repetition and reenactment.

Laine Kristberga (2025a) extends this discussion to Latvian performance art, showing that still and moving images act as "crucial documents" that both record and reconstitute ephemeral works. Similarly, Cornelia Bohn observes that as art becomes event-based, "the distinctions between the work, its documentation and its reproduction are becoming ever less significant" (Bohn 2022: 52–53). In this light, documentation is not secondary but constitutive and part of the performance's intermedial afterlife. Astrid Erll's reflections on mediality help to explain why: "Just like memory, media do not simply reflect reality, but instead offer constructions of the past. What they appear to encode – versions of past events and persons, cultural values and norms, concepts of collective identity – they are in fact first creating" (Erll 2011: 114).

Thus, while intertextuality reveals how performance reconfigures folkloric material, intermediality explains how it circulates, endures, and acquires new meanings through mediation. Together, they frame performance as both embodied and mediated – a site where folklore is simultaneously lived, recorded, and reinvented, acknowledging that meaning cannot be fully captured within a textual framework, yet is never entirely separate from it.

Finally, the concept of radical aesthetics illuminates how performance art reconfigures folklore through transgression and transformation. Radical aesthetics, as used here, describes artistic strategies that challenge cultural norms and unsettle inherited meanings through intervention, risk, and symbolic disruption.

Baz Kershaw argues that "radical performance always participates in the most vital cultural, social and political tensions of its time" (Kershaw 1999: 7). For him, performance is inseparable from its historical moment: it reflects and refracts the ideological pressures of the present. Bojana Kunst offers a complementary perspective, defining performance as "a particular temporal rupture, a material implosion of different forces, which is always singular and, in this way, escapes the desire for capture" (Kunst 2015: 1). Rather than representing resistance, performance *enacts* it through producing micropolitical rearrangements within the materiality of the present.

Within this framework, radical aesthetics is not limited to explicit political content but to transformative form – the moment when folklore's inherited symbols are reimagined in contemporary terms. Orinska's *Bearman* embodies intercultural hybridity; Maskava's *Ancestral Body* transgresses bodily and ecological boundaries; Kainulainen and Latva's puppetry reanimates shamanic archetypes of death and renewal. Each demonstrates how performance art mobilizes folklore's symbolic vocabulary to address gender, ecology, trauma, and identity through radical aesthetic reconfiguration.

Together, these frameworks – folklore as a dynamic social field, cultural memory and mediation, performance and embodiment, intertextuality and intermediality, and radical aesthetics – form the conceptual foundation of this study. They reveal how folklore functions in contemporary performance as a living, adaptive system: one that sustains collective memory through embodied transmission, transforms inherited symbols through mediation, and generates new meanings through radical aesthetic intervention. This integrated theoretical lens provides the basis for the methodological approach that follows, allowing the analysis to trace how performance art reconfigures folklore into a practice of cultural negotiation and creative renewal.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, case study–based methodology (Kershaw, Nicholson 2011), which is particularly suited to analyzing performance art as a complex, multilayered form. Performance generates meaning on semiotic, affective, and visual levels simultaneously; to account for this complexity, a systemic approach is adopted, following Erika Fischer-Lichte's view of performance as an interrelated network of signs, bodies, spaces, and spectators (Fischer-Lichte 2008). Because performance is inherently situated, ephemeral, and processual, it cannot be treated as a fixed object but must be examined as a dynamic process that unfolds in specific contexts and leaves traces across multiple (inter)media.

The study focuses on three purposefully selected case studies:[3] Simona Orinska's *Bearman* (Latvia, 2018), Anna Maskava's *Ancestral Body* (Latvia, 2024–2025), and the collaborative works of Katri Kainulainen and Maximilian Latva (Finland, 2018–ongoing). These examples were chosen not to represent national canons but to foreground how Baltic and Nordic performance artists engage folklore and ritual as living systems of meaning. Collectively, they demonstrate three strategies of reworking folklore in performance: ritual-liminal transformation (*Bearman*), ecological-feminist embodiment (*Ancestral Body*), and object-centered storytelling (Kainulainen & Latva).

The methodological design integrates folkloristics, performance studies, and cultural memory theory, each contributing distinct analytical tools. First, folkloristics situates folklore as a dynamic social practice rather than a fixed corpus of texts, following Dundes's (1975) notion of expressive behavior and Bauman's (1975, 2004) concept of performance as "artistic action." Ķencis's (2025) understanding of folklore as a socially structured field further grounds the analysis in historical and institutional realities, connecting artistic reinterpretations to discourses of heritage, identity, and representation. Second, performance studies provides frameworks for understanding embodiment, transformation, and ritual. Schechner's concept of "restored behavior" (1985) and Turner's theory of liminality (1969) enable reading performances as spaces where cultural patterns are reassembled and reactivated through symbolic action. Third, memory studies, particularly through Assmann (1995) and Erll (2011), introduces the temporal dimension: folklore is examined as a mode of cultural memory, where gestures, myths, and symbols function as media of transmission and transformation. Together, these approaches establish a model of performance as a site of embodied cultural negotiation, where ritual and memory intersect through both live and mediated enactments.

To bridge these frameworks, the analysis employs intertextuality and intermediality as heuristic tools. Kristeva's (1986) and Bauman's (2004) concepts of intertextuality make it possible to trace how performances cite, transform, and recontextualize folkloric materials. Intermediality, drawing on Erll (2011), Auslander (2006), and Kristberga (2025a), illuminates how performance persists and circulates through its documentation, revealing the continuity between live events and their mediated afterlives. As Erll reminds us, "media are not simply neutral carriers of information

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3   The author of the article has seen the selected performances, as she is the director and curator of the Riga Performance Festival Starptelpa (https://www.rigaperformancefestival.com/), and was a co-curator for Anna Maskava's exhibition Ancestral Body (2024-2025).

about the past [..] what they appear to encode – versions of past events, values, and identities – they are in fact first creating" (Erll 2011: 114).

This interdisciplinary synthesis aligns with the pluralistic methodology outlined in *The Cambridge Guide to Mixed Methods Research for Theatre and Performance Studies* (2024). Natalie Alvarez, drawing on Denzin and Lincoln, describes the "methodological bricoleur" as one who moves between overlapping paradigms to reveal competing perspectives on a phenomenon. For Alvarez, research in performance studies entails "an overlaying of frameworks [since] qualitative methods are inherently mixed" (Alvarez 2024: 119–120). This study adopts such bricolage – layering folkloristics, performance theory, and memory studies to interpret performance as an interwoven field of embodiment, mediation, and cultural symbolism.

Reflecting this pluralism, the analysis draws on diverse materials: live observation, artists' portfolios, video and photographic documentation, critical reviews, and correspondence with the artists. These sources allow both descriptive reconstruction and interpretive analysis, capturing the fluidity of performance as event and as mediation. The approach is comparative, moving between close readings of each case study and thematic synthesis across them. Methodologically, it is both analytical and hermeneutic, attending to live enactments and their mediated traces, from moving images to interviews and archival records.

Methodological sensitivity is crucial when engaging with Indigenous traditions, particularly the Sámi cultural practices referenced in *Bearman*. As Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) and K. Wayne Yang emphasize, research must be grounded in "respectful and mutually beneficial relationships between researchers and Indigenous communities" (Tuck (Unangax̂), Yang 2019: xii) and avoid perpetuating "a collective consciousness of superiority over Indigenous peoples" (Tuck (Unangax̂), Yang 2019: xviii). Acknowledging its non-Indigenous standpoint, this article approaches Sámi cultural elements with respect, accuracy, and contextual awareness, drawing on Sámi voices where available. This reflexive positioning extends to all aspects of the research design, ensuring that analysis remains ethically responsible and methodologically transparent.

The reliance on documentation inevitably introduces interpretive distance between the live event and its mediated representations. Photographs, videos, and reviews cannot capture the affective immediacy and relational dynamics of performance. Similarly, folkloric allusions may elicit divergent readings between artists, scholars, and audiences. Accordingly, this study does not claim exhaustive representation but offers situated interpretations, foregrounding mediation, context, and theoretical framing as integral to the methodological process.

In sum, this methodology approaches performance art as a living system of meaning, analyzed through a layered, dialogic framework that unites folkloristics,

Figure 1. Butoh-inspired choreography in *Bearman* (2018) directed by Simona Orinska for the Riga Performance Festival *Starptelpa*. Photograph by Paulis Jakušonoks

performance theory, and memory studies. By integrating intertextuality, intermediality, and radical aesthetics within an ethically reflexive and mixed-methods paradigm, it aims to reveal how contemporary artists reconfigure folklore to engage with questions of identity, embodiment, and cultural transformation.

Intertextuality in Ritual and Performance: The Case of *Bearman*

Simona Orinska's *Bearman* (*Lāčuvīrs*, 2018),[4] presented at the Riga Performance Festival *Starptelpa*, exemplifies how contemporary performance art reactivates folklore as a living form of cultural memory. Drawing on Latvian, Sámi, and Japanese ritual traditions, Orinska merges

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4   Simona Orinska is a Latvian Butoh artist, choreographer, and director whose practice explores the intersections of movement, ritual, and performance art. She leads the interdisciplinary performance groups *Butoh Lab* and *Ideagnosis*. In *Bearman*, Orinska acted as the director, shaping the work's choreographic and conceptual framework. *Bearman* was conceived as a hybrid work that combined elements of performance art, theatre, and ritual, requiring dramaturgy, choreography, and extensive rehearsal. While not performance art in the strictest sense, the work demonstrates a strong affinity with its principles – particularly its emphasis on affective intensity, embodied presence, and visceral immediacy characteristic of live art.

myth and embodiment into a cross-cultural ritual of transformation that foregrounds the bear as a figure of liminality, ancestry, and renewal. In doing so, *Bearman* demonstrates how performance art mobilizes folklore as a dynamic process of symbolic negotiation, where myth and ritual are continually reconfigured through embodiment and mediation.

From the perspective of folklore and cultural memory, the bear (*lācis*) carries profound symbolic weight in Baltic and Nordic mythology. It has long been revered as both ancestor and liminal being, inhabiting the threshold between human and animal, natural and supernatural. In Latvian lullabies and seasonal rituals, as in Sámi bear feasts, the animal emerges not just as a symbol of strength but as a mediator linking the human, the natural, and the spiritual worlds – embodying what Jan Assmann would call a "reusable" cultural image (Assmann 1995: 132). In *Bearman*, this ancestral figure is reactivated through performance, entering into dialogue with both folkloric memory and contemporary concerns.

The dramaturgy of the piece unfolded as an initiation ritual culminating in the symbolic birth of the Bearman (Arvis Kantiševs). This birth – marked by struggle, dissolution, and renewal – resonates with Victor Turner's concept of liminality as a threshold condition in which "normative structures are suspended" (Turner 1969: 95). The Butoh-inspired choreography, performed by Simona Orinska's Butoh group, emphasized this passage through contractions, nests, and cyclical gestures that evoked both cosmic and biological rhythms (Figure 1). Here, the body became the medium of mythic storytelling, affirming Dwight Conquergood's assertion that performance is "a way of knowing," rooted in embodied and participatory experience (Conquergood 2002: 152).

Intertextuality emerged not only through symbolic motifs but through the layering of distinct cultural systems. Japanese Butoh, Sámi yoik performed by Torgeir Vassvik, and Latvian *kokle* music by Sanita Sprūža formed a polyphonic ritual space where heterogeneous voices converged without collapsing into homogeneity. This "relational orientation of a text to other texts" (Bauman 2004: 2) framed *Bearman* as an intertextual ritual in which folklore operates dialogically, producing meaning through resonance, not replication. While intertextuality structured the symbolic and ritual dialogue, intermediality extended it by transforming ephemeral gestures into mediated sound and image.

The intermedial dimension was central to the dramaturgy. Gita Straustiņa's revolving video projections created a visual echo of the cosmic bear, dissolving the boundaries between corporeal and celestial, live and mediated. As Laine Kristberga observes, in much of Latvian performance art "documentation and mediation are not secondary but constitutive," since many works "exist only in their mediatized or

Figure 2. Dana Indāne-Surkienė as the Bear Mother and Ancestress in *Bearman* at the Riga Performance Festival *Starptelpa* (2018). Photograph by Paulis Jakušonoks.

intermedial form" (Kristberga 2018: 142; 2025a: 2). In *Bearman*, live performance and projection were interdependent, forming a hybrid environment where the performative and the mediated continuously redefined one another.

The soundscape likewise moved beyond verbal language. Groans, cries, and laughter intertwined with musical and electronic textures, recalling Antonin Artaud's vision of a "unique language halfway between gesture and thought" (1958: 37). Meaning arose not from narrative coherence but from intensity, aligning with Susan Broadhurst's observation that experimental performance generates significance through affective charge rather than textual linearity (Broadhurst 1999: 11). Within this visceral field, Dana Indāne-Surkienė, who was heavily pregnant at the time of the performance, embodied the Bear Mother and Ancestress, merging the symbolic and the biological (Figure 2). Her vocal improvisations and physical presence enacted what Diana Taylor calls the "repertoire", or the enactment of embodied memory, comprising "performances, gestures, orality, movement, dancing, singing" (Taylor 2003: 20). Indāne-Surkienė's presence anchored myth in lived experience, collapsing the divide between archetype and reality.

Taken together, *Bearman* demonstrates how performance art reconfigures folklore through the intertwined logics of intertextuality and intermediality. Through

the layering of mythic figures, ritual structures, and intercultural symbols, Orinska constructs a work that both enacts and interrogates cultural memory. By transforming inherited narratives into embodied and mediated experience, *Bearman* performs folklore as a living, dialogic practice that sustains continuity through its capacity for change and reinvention within a contemporary, transcultural context.

Interwoven Realities: Myth, Embodiment, and Intermediality in Anna Maskava's *Ancestral Body*

Anna Maskava's exhibition *Ancestral Body* (2024–2025) exemplifies how contemporary performance art reconfigures folklore through feminist, ecological, and intermedial strategies.[5] Combining performative photographs, video works, installations, and live actions, the project constructs a dialogue between mythological archetypes, ancestral memory, and embodied storytelling (see for more Kristberga 2026). The photographs at its core function both as documentation and as autonomous artworks, situating Maskava's body as a living archive through which cultural memory is enacted and transformed. Through photographic mediation, Maskava creates what Laine Kristberga terms intermedial works – hybrid forms that exist "only in their mediatized form" yet retain the intensity of the live act (Kristberga 2018: 142; 2025a: 2).

The forest serves as both setting and symbolic agent. In Latvian folklore, it is a chthonic realm inhabited by spirits, ancestors, and liminal beings.[6] Jana Kukaine observes that in Maskava's photographs, the forest appears not as a romantic idyll but as a "liminal territory inhabited by outcasts of society as well as various spirits and supernatural beings" (Kukaine 2025). By entering this space, Maskava embodies the folkloric motif of encountering other-than-human forces, yet she complicates it through discomfort and risk: ants sting her hand, hornets swarm nearby, and a chestnut presses into her skin. These gestures disrupt idealized depictions of nature, foregrounding vulnerability, interdependence, and friction. As feminist critics Kukaine and Kārkla note, such "feral feminism" resists the Western gendered logic of the forest, casting women as "uncanny agentic subjects who belong to the forest imaginatively, affectively, and artistically" (Kukaine, Kārkla 2025). Maskava's forest

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5   https://www.annamaskava.com/works/ancestral-body

6   The svētbirzis (sacred groves) were central to pre-Christian ritual practice, serving as sites of offerings and communication with deities. See *Tezaurs.lv*, s.v. "Meža māte"; *Latvijas Nacionālais vēstures muzejs, Sakrālais mežs* (https://emuzejs.lnvm.lv/resursi/galerijas-un-virtualas-izstades/galerijas-airis-mozus-un-radio-koks-latvijas-vesture/sakralais-mezs).

Figure 3. Anna Maskava
Ancestral Body (2024–2025).
Photograph by Anna Maskava.

is therefore not a site of harmony but of confrontation – a liminal territory where gender, ecology, and corporeality intertwine.

Central to *Ancestral Body* is the mythic figure of the grass-snake (*zalktis*), a sacred mediator between worlds in Latvian mythology, associated with fertility, protection, and transformation (Kalnačs 2025). Maskava reinterprets this symbol through a feminist lens. In one photograph, she entwines her body with a live snake, evoking the biblical motif of Eve and the serpent. Yet rather than replicating the patriarchal narrative of temptation and sin, she transforms the snake into a companion and ally (Figure 3).

As Kukaine observes, Maskava "reconfigures the composition into a horizontal relationship, where the snake is an ally rather than an adversary" (Kukaine 2025). This rearticulation not only subverts Christian symbolism but also reclaims pagan myth as a feminist counter-narrative. The double zigzag formed by her body and the snake visually echoes Māra's sacred symbol – "the zigzag as the visual representation of Māra, one of the principal female deities in Latvian mythology" (Ūdre 2024: 134) – thereby extending the work into an intertextual dialogue with ancient iconography and feminist reinterpretation alike.

Figure 4. Anna Maskava
Ancestral Body (2024–2025).
Photograph by Anna Maskava.

Embodiment in *Ancestral Body* becomes a radical form of storytelling. Maskava's performances transgress bodily boundaries, transforming exposure, pain, and vulnerability into aesthetic and political gestures. Actions such as embroidering a lifeline onto her palm (Figure 4) or piercing her body with animal horns enact what Conquergood calls "embodied knowledge," where the body functions as a site of meaning-making and resistance (Conquergood 2002: 152). These gestures evoke folkloric initiation rituals of transformation while also recalling feminist performance genealogies – from Marina Abramović to Ana Mendieta – where the body serves as both medium and manifesto.

Equally integral is the role of intermediality. *Ancestral Body* reaches audiences primarily through its photographic traces, which serve as extensions of the time-based performance, carrying its affective and conceptual force beyond the live moment. In Maskava's case, the camera becomes an active participant, mediating between live act and afterlife, transforming bodily gesture into a performative image. These photographs are rich in symbolic layering and formal composition and operate as performative objects in their own right, generating new contexts for mythic and feminist reading.

Ultimately, *Ancestral Body* exemplifies how folklore can be reimagined through contemporary performance as a living, mutable practice. By situating her body within the forest, Maskava invokes ancestral myths of transformation; by entwining with nonhuman beings, she foregrounds posthumanist interdependence and the porous boundaries between species; by mediating her acts through photography, she ensures their survival and recontextualization. Her work thus transforms folklore into a mode of critical inquiry, challenging patriarchal and anthropocentric interpretations while reaffirming the body as the primary medium through which cultural memory and myth are continuously rewritten.

Ritual, Objecthood, and Collective Memory in the Work of Katri Kainulainen and Maximilian Latva

The performances of Finnish artists Katri Kainulainen and Maximilian Latva exemplify how puppetry can function as a liminal medium between human and nonhuman, material and symbolic, personal and collective.[7] Their work merges folkloric, shamanic, and contemporary performance vocabularies into ritual interventions where objects, such as puppets, masks, hair, and bones, become animate participants in processes of memory, mourning, and transformation. As Kristberga observes, "they construct performances as ritualistic interventions, where cultural narratives are reimagined only to expose their fluidity, contradictions, and enduring power – thus not merely re-enacting tradition but interrogating it" (Kristberga 2025b: 246).

From a folkloric and ritual perspective, puppets and masks have long mediated between worlds. John Bell notes that "puppets, masks, and objects have always had a strong connection to folk theatre, popular theatre, and religion" (Bell 2001: 13). Similarly, in shamanic practice, such objects act as vessels of metamorphosis, conduits between visible and invisible realms. Richard Schechner's notion of "second beings [as] organized sequences of events, scripted actions, known texts, scored movements [that can be] stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed" (1985: 35–36), aptly describes the ontology of the puppet as a site of reactivation and renewal. Within Kainulainen and Latva's performances, puppetry thus becomes a ritualized form of storytelling in which objects attain agency, simultaneously material and metaphysical.

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7   The bear also features prominently in Kainulainen and Latva's performances, appearing as a life-size, anthropomorphic costume. In their work, it assumes a satirical and carnivalesque function, extending the folkloric motif into a commentary on human behavior and transformation, while reflecting the enduring resonance of the bear archetype in Baltic-Nordic cosmologies. For more detail, see Kristberga (2025b).

Their puppet *Antero* lies at the heart of this practice. Constructed as a fragile skeleton, continually broken and repaired, Antero embodies the dialectic of loss and regeneration. Kainulainen describes him as both child and portrait: "Antero is not only my son, but he is also a portrait of Max" (Kainulainen 2025). This conflation of kinship and artistry transforms the puppet into what Dwight Conquergood terms an act of "embodied storytelling" – a mode of narrative where "identity and experience are mediated through material and symbolic action" (Conquergood 2002: 152). The making and remaking of Antero becomes an allegory of survival, healing, and interdependence (Figure 5).

Intertextual references infuse these performances with mythic resonance. Antero's skeletal form recalls what Margaret Stutley identifies as a central motif in shamanic initiation – the dismemberment and reconstitution of the body as a rite of transformation (Stutley 2003: 11). The gesture of gluing human hair with honey alludes to ancient Baltic-Finnic preservation rituals and to folklore's intimate link between the organic and the sacred. "We were moving through time," Kainulainen explains, "attempting to mend someone who had been hurt decades earlier" (Kainulainen 2025). Here, myth and ritual converge in what Bakhtin describes as

dialogism: the coexistence of multiple temporalities and voices that collapse distinctions between past and present (Bakhtin 1986: 62).

Through such acts, performance becomes a form of cultural memory. Aleida Assmann describes memory as embodied practice, "a living connection between individuals and the cultural archive" (Assmann 2011: 42). Kainulainen and Latva activate this connection, translating private trauma into collective remembrance. As Conquergood argues, performance functions as "a way of knowing, a method of inquiry, and a mode of critique" (Conquergood 2002: 149). Their work transforms individual grief into a shared ritual of witness, where the repair of a puppet becomes a metaphor for the restoration of relational and cultural continuities.

Intermediality further extends this process. Much of their oeuvre survives through video recordings, festival documentation, and photography. Following Philip Auslander's insight that "performance and its documentation are not ontologically distinct but mutually implicated" (Auslander 2006: 5), their mediated traces are integral to the work's ontology. Documentation constitutes a dynamic process that reactivates the work through mediation, revives the ephemeral event within new temporal and aesthetic frameworks, and allows folklore's transformation to continue across different media.

Ultimately, Kainulainen and Latva's practice reveals how contemporary performance reconfigures folklore through the entanglement of ritual, materiality, and mediation. Their work enacts what David Napier calls the "inseparability of symbol and ritual," where meaning emerges through embodied action: "Between object and context lies the ritual activity that marks the connection; it is within ritual that objects and actions become contextual and connotative" (Napier 1992: xvii). *Antero*, at once object and being, becomes a palimpsest of personal and cultural memory and a performative vessel that transforms folklore from representation into an act of lived experience, critical disassembly, and creative reconstruction.

In this synthesis of intertextual myth, embodied ritual, and intermedial circulation, Kainulainen and Latva's work exemplifies the radical aesthetics of transformation: performance as an act of renewal that blurs the boundaries between art, life, and ancestral memory.

Discussion:
Folklore in Contemporary Performance
as Cultural Negotiation
This discussion argues that contemporary performance art transforms folklore into a site of cultural negotiation – a performative field where memory, myth, and embodiment are

continuously reimagined. Consequently, folklore in performance becomes a dynamic process of resignification that addresses present concerns such as ecological crisis, gender politics, and cultural trauma.

Alan Dundes emphasized that deriving the meaning of folklore requires contextualizing expression within its social and behavioral settings. He described folklore as "a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of taboo and anxiety-provoking behavior. One can do or say in folkloric form things otherwise interdicted in everyday life" (Dundes 2005: 359). For Dundes, the "apparent irrationality" of folklore poses a challenge to literal-minded interpretation: "It is not easy to find a rationale for the irrational, to make sense of 'nonsense,' but that is what folklorists seriously interested in interpretation must try to do" (Dundes 1980: viii). Similarly, Simon J. Bronner argues that "to grasp why folklore is needed as an expressive outlet, one therefore needs to know the cultural values, taboos, anxieties, and beliefs of the society in which individual tradition-bearers operate" (Bronner 2007: 3). These insights illuminate the parallel between folklore and performance art: both function as expressive systems that externalize and negotiate cultural tensions, giving form to what is otherwise repressed or unspeakable. In contemporary performance, folkloric motifs extend this sublimatory function into new social and aesthetic contexts, transforming inherited symbols into vehicles of critique, resistance, and reflection.

Through this lens, the affective, irrational, and taboo-breaking dimensions of folklore find renewed expression in performance art, where acts of transformation and embodiment become modes of cultural memory. The radical aesthetics of these reactivations lie in their capacity to transgress normative boundaries and to convert ritual or mythic material into performative strategies that interrogate inherited worldviews and collective anxieties.

Viewed as cultural memory, folklore continually brings the past into play through its reinvention in the present. Myth-making serves as its narrative counterpart – the process through which collective values and experiences are encoded and transmitted. Myths endure because they condense cultural meaning into symbolic figures that structure the present. In the Baltic context, figures such as the *lācis* (bear) and *zalktis* (grass-snake) mark cosmological thresholds between human, nonhuman, and ancestral realms. Contemporary artists who re-stage these figures engage in active myth-making: by recontextualizing symbols, they unsettle inherited meanings and generate new resonances. Animal and ancestral motifs, when reclaimed in ecological or feminist performance, become vehicles for posthumanist and counter-patriarchal thought. Storytelling here is embodied rather than verbal – myth becomes lived experience through gesture, movement, and ritual.

In Orinska's *Bearman*, the myth of the bear was revived through the layering of

Latvian, Sámi, and Japanese traditions, creating a ritual space of transformation and renewal. Maskava's *Ancestral Body* reframed the forest and its creatures as carriers of ancestral knowledge through feminist and ecological lenses that challenged patriarchal and anthropocentric legacies. In Kainulainen & Latva's performances, shamanic and folkloric archetypes of death, dismemberment, and rebirth were mobilized to address trauma and collective memory. Across these examples, folklore functions as a living language of transformation and as a medium for negotiating continuity and rupture, identity and change.

These dynamics recall earlier processes identified by Ķencis, in which folklore was instrumentalized during nation-building and later under Soviet rule as symbolic capital within ideological struggles. As he notes, "authenticity functioned as a specific form of symbolic capital within the folklore field, structuring the struggles between folklore revivalists and Soviet cultural authorities" (Ķencis 2025: 25). In contemporary performance, authenticity is again contested, however not as fidelity to tradition, but as performative quest and reconfiguration. Orinska reactivates bear rituals through intercultural dialogue, Maskava reclaims mythic archetypes through feminist embodiment, and Kainulainen & Latva animate puppets as ritual vessels of memory and repair. Each transforms authenticity into an act of negotiation between inherited forms and present realities.

Myth, as Roland Barthes claims, is a semiotic system that naturalizes ideology as "a type of speech, a system of communication" (Barthes 1991 [1957]: 107), yet it is also perpetually open to resignification. In *Bearman*, the bear was reframed through the embodied liminality of Butoh and digital projections; in *Ancestral Body*, the biblical serpent was reimagined as an ally rather than a tempter; in Kainulainen & Latva's work, the puppet Antero enacted shamanic rebirth as an allegory of trauma and renewal. Myth here functions as a symbolic repertoire that is continuously reinterpreted within performance, revealing its adaptability and enduring social resonance.

Across these performances, the body remains the central site of negotiation. Orinska's performers enacted transformation through ritualized birth and collective embodiment; Maskava inscribed mythic and ritual symbols directly on her own body; Kainulainen & Latva extended embodiment into objecthood, animating puppets as sentient extensions of the self. These strategies affirm Conquergood's notion of performance as "a way of knowing" (Conquergood 2002: 152), where knowledge is produced through corporeal and affective engagement. Performance thus emerges as both epistemological and political; it is an embodied mode of inquiry that challenges dominant systems of representation.

The case studies also expose the sociopolitical stakes of reactivating folklore

today. Orinska's Bearman raises questions of cultural sensitivity and positionality in cross-cultural artistic exchange, particularly in relation to Sámi traditions. Maskava's *Ancestral Body* intervenes in patriarchal and anthropocentric mythologies by reimagining femininity and nonhuman agency. Kainulainen & Latva's ritualized puppetry translates trauma into shared experience, suggesting that performance can articulate collective memory and vulnerability without resorting to literal narration. Together, these works illustrate how performance art mobilizes folklore not as nostalgia but as a critical, transformative practice.

Finally, distinguishing intertextuality from intermediality clarifies how these performances operate across symbolic and material registers. Intertextuality explains how folkloric motifs are reconfigured and cited, while intermediality reveals how performances persist through documentation, technology, and repetition. As Matthew Reason notes, documentation "does not simply reproduce performance but interprets it," producing its own aesthetic and emotional truth (Reason 2006: 2–3). Mechtild Widrich extends this logic to monuments and performances alike, suggesting that both possess "performative force – the fact that through conventional gestures they effect changes in social reality" (Widrich 2014: 9). In this sense, folkloric reactivation in performance art achieves performative force by intervening in cultural memory and reshaping identity, ancestry, and belonging.

Collectively, these works demonstrate that folklore in contemporary performance is neither static heritage nor mere quotation, but a living, contested, and politically charged aesthetic practice. Its cultural sustainability lies in its capacity for transformation, namely, in the intertextual reconfigurations and intermedial afterlives through which folklore endures as cultural memory and symbolic capital. Through radical aesthetics that merge ritual, embodiment, and mediation, performance art reclaims folklore as a language of renewal, translating ancestral memory into forms that speak to the most vital social and ecological tensions of our time.

Conclusion

The case studies reveal that in contemporary performance art, folklore emerges as a mutable and dynamic practice, continually reshaped through memory, myth, and embodied storytelling within intertextual and intermedial frameworks. Symbols and visual codes migrate across time and geography, producing new meanings that link ancestral heritage with contemporary sensibilities.

At the same time, these artistic practices must be situated within the broader context of ongoing struggles over cultural identity in the Baltic-Nordic region. Such struggles are historical, shaped by the legacies of colonization, Christianization, and,

in the Baltic states, Soviet rule – all of which determined how folklore was pre-served, censored, and instrumentalized. They are also political, embedded in debates about nationalism, minority representation, and Indigenous rights, particularly concerning Sámi traditions that have often been marginalized or appropriated. They are artistic, as contemporary performance reclaims folklore as a space of experimentation and critique against patriarchal and institutionalized narratives. And they are existential, as artists and communities negotiate belonging amid ecological crisis, globalization, and migration. In this sense, folklore can be seen as a contested terrain through which historical wounds, social hierarchies, and collective aspirations are continuously renegotiated.

Within this framework, the three case studies illuminate how cultural memory is activated and reimagined in performance. The bear, the forest, and the puppet as recurring figures across these works carry deep symbolic resonance within Baltic and Nordic traditions. Yet the artists transform them into living mediators between past and present, negotiating questions of ancestry, belonging, and continuity in contexts marked by colonial histories and the aftermath of Soviet cultural control.

Moreover, the works demonstrate how myth-making operates as a contemporary practice of meaning-making. Myths are not immutable stories but dynamic symbolic resources open to resignification. Orinska reframed the bear as a liminal archetype of transformation; Maskava revalued the snake as a feminist and ecological ally; and Kainulainen & Latva reactivated shamanic myths of dismemberment and rebirth through puppetry. In each instance, myth becomes a medium for articulating present-day concerns, whether it is ecological anxiety, gender politics, and cultural trauma, while sustaining a dialogue with ancient cosmologies.

Equally, the case studies foreground the role of embodied storytelling. Performance art, like folklore, transmits knowledge through the body, gesture, and sensory experience. Orinska's ritual choreography, Maskava's corporeal inscriptions, and Kainulainen & Latva's object-animating puppetry all affirm embodiment as a form of knowledge production. These works remind us that folklore persists not only in texts or archives but in lived, bodily practices that transform the act of remembrance into performative re-creation.

Methodologically, this article has argued for the necessity of integrating inter-textual and intermedial perspectives. Intertextuality explains how performances engage in dialogue with folkloric narratives and symbols, situating them within new cultural constellations. Intermediality, meanwhile, reveals how performances persist and circulate beyond their live enactment, through photography, video, and archival documentation. As Reason (2006), Widrich (2014), and Kristberga (2018,

2025a) have shown, documentation is not ancillary but constitutive: performance and its traces are "mutually implicated." Together, these frameworks enable us to understand performance as a mediated practice whose meaning unfolds across bodies, images, and technologies.

Finally, the case studies underscore the sociopolitical and aesthetic stakes of reactivating folklore in performance. Orinska's *Bearman* employs intercultural hybridity, combining Butoh with Sámi ritual elements performed by Torgeir Vassvik to question how symbolic motifs can be shared and recontextualized ethically. Maskava's *Ancestral Body* challenges patriarchal and anthropocentric mythologies, offering feminist and posthumanist visions of kinship and transformation. Kainulainen & Latva's ritualized puppetry translates trauma into material form, transforming objects into vessels of memory and empathy. In each case, folklore becomes a performative medium through which radical aesthetics operate as acts of symbolic disruption, contradiction, and renewal.

In sum, this article has argued that the dialogue between folklore and performance art produces layered practices of cultural negotiation that are simultaneously intertextual, intermedial, and embodied. Situated within the Baltic-Nordic context, these practices illuminate how artists reconfigure tradition to address contemporary cultural, ecological, and political concerns. The synergy between folklore as traditional heritage and performance art as contemporary and experimental form may at times produce friction – even perceived blasphemy – yet this very tension underscores folklore's vitality. Folklore, thus, functions as a living and contested practice in which memory and myth are continually renewed through performance. Its cultural sustainability resides in these intertextual reconfigurations and intermedial afterlives, which enable folklore to adapt to new contexts while retaining its symbolic force. Through these processes, performance art transforms inherited traditions into active, critical practices, thus sustaining dialogue between past and present, human and nonhuman, and between art and life itself.

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