

Comment

This essay was commissioned by Griffith University Art Museum to mark the 40th anniversary of Her Divine Holiness Pope Alice.

On the 15th of September 1980, the inimitable Pope Alice made her debut at Spring Hill Gallery, Brisbane, at an exhibition by Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, alum Luke Roberts. *Pope Alice Presents Luke Roberts* was the first opportunity audiences had to witness the spectacle of Her Divine Holiness Pope Alice, who opened Roberts's 1980 exhibition at Spring Hill Gallery and appeared at various locations around Brisbane to mark the occasion, including King George Square.

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POPE ALICE – 40 YEARS

Dr Laini Burton

As she slowly emerged from the Rolls Royce to present Luke Robert's 1980 Exhibition at the Spring Hill Art Gallery in Brisbane, Her Divine Holiness Pope Alice could not have anticipated the impact of her presence on the Australian art scene in the years that followed. Four decades on, the Griffith University Art Museum has formally recognised her contribution, digitising Pope Alice's vast archive of video works and performance documentation to ensure the works remain accessible to future generations of artists.

Long guided by her trusted emissary, camerlengo, head of wardrobe and earthly conduit, it is the artist Luke Roberts who has assumed the persona, Pope Alice, for over forty years. Catalysed by a Catholic upbringing in conservative country Queensland, and subject to the political injustices experienced by gay people in the Bjelke-Petersen era, Pope Alice represented Roberts's wholesale dissatisfaction with the socio-political environment of the 1980s. Among these foundational experiences, Roberts has also drawn on a wide range of interests to inform Pope Alice's earthly mission, such as opening us up to the possibilities of extra-terrestrial life. And although her name signals a nod to Catholicism, Pope Alice operates as a kind of sovereign entity that extends beyond religion and earthly pursuits; an embodiment of extra-terrestrial sentience. In using papal nomenclature and costumes that bear a close resemblance to liturgical vestments, Pope Alice can—as the clergy do—declare herself an agent of peace, albeit with a different origin. In conversation with Roberts, he reveals Pope Alice possesses a strong drive to keep pushing for a revised awareness of our origin story.¹ Often citing the discovery of Erich Von Däniken's 1968 text *Chariots of the Gods?* as a revelation, Roberts maintains that Pope Alice will continue to question the limits of accepted knowledge, putting forward alternative positions for our understanding of life on Earth.

This ongoing quest has meant that Pope Alice, as a persona, has evolved over time. ‘Persona’, which is Latin for mask, is a tool through which one can reveal their true selves, enact their intentions without fear of reprisal, and be bolstered by the relative anonymity that the mask can provide. It is for this reason that you will hear Roberts speak of Pope Alice in the third person, and yet, the two are inextricably entwined. Cultural theorists have argued that we wear multiple masks, each one being as authentic as the next. One might think of the oft-quoted gender-bending early twentieth-century French photographer Claude Cahun when she said “Under the mask, another mask. I will never finish removing all these faces”. The mask enables you to see but not be seen, allowing one-way scrutiny. It is, at once, invitation and repellent, enabling a wearer to pass boundaries of behaviour and class. Masking has become a liberating device for participants in pride parades the world over. And with Australia’s own Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras emerging out of Sydney in 1978—the very time at which Pope Alice was beginning to manifest—the politics were ripe for change. Not least, the politics in Brisbane which were considered provincial to its more sophisticated southern cousins, Sydney and Melbourne. Roberts understood the power of masking and masquerade. Consequently, Pope Alice has continued to use these strategies within her increasingly exaggerated forms and critique of the dominant narratives to significant effect over her long career.

In his renowned text *Rabelais and his world*, Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin neatly summarised the role of the mask in traditional carnival:

The mask is related to transition, metamorphosis, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles.²

Pope Alice is an example of carnival *par excellence*. She subverts and liberates not just the traditions of the church, but of gender, identity, and the origin story itself. Moreover, she subverts the very limits of carnival, extending it over an expanded length of time to revel in an impressive four decades of carnivalesque activity. Her dazzling costumes demonstrate an astonishing array of cultural and historical referents, drawn from across time and place. This is as much a reflection on the material and technology changes, as it is on the shifts in socio-political and cultural attitudes over the last four decades. We can see it unfold as we witness Pope Alice’s earlier video works and juxtapose them with the slick documentation of more recent work. Or, one might compare the early Venetian-carnival-inspired costumes to those carefully crafted costumes worn in appearances at The Asia Pacific Triennials 8 and 9, for example, to understand how Pope Alice has embraced technological revolutions to enhance her messages of tolerance, peace, and inclusivity. This cultural and historical montage has been a feature of Pope Alice’s performances from the very beginning. Evidence is found in early critical reviews of Pope Alice’s work where, in a 1989 issue of *Eyeline* magazine, Urszula Szulakowska declared “[t]hough an archaeologist of cultural memory, Roberts goes further and creates a topology of new associations which escape the hierarchies of mythology.”³

Time and again, Roberts has expressed an abiding interest in the Wunderkammer, those cabinets of curiosities that arose in the sixteenth century as repositories for the exotic, the marvellous, oddities of nature, and misunderstood phenomena. Indeed, the papal Wunderkammer of Pope Alice has been staged several times by Roberts, with the first iteration displayed in 1990 at the State Library of Queensland. The Wunderkammer is an apt metaphor for Pope Alice herself, with its broadly inclusive system of disciplinary beliefs and cultural references. Curator Michelle Helmrich suggested as much in 1995 when reviewing Roberts's 1994-1995 Queensland Art Gallery exhibition *Wunderkammer Kunstkamera: Luke Roberts*. Here, she notes that nothing less would be expected from "Pope Alice-The World's Greatest Living Curiosity".⁴ It would be fair to say, as one looked back over the last forty years of Pope Alice's oeuvre, that her Wunderkammer, like Her Divine Holiness's cosmos itself, is still in a state of expansion.

While the official anniversary of Pope Alice is celebrated on 15 September 1980, Roberts confesses that the persona of Pope Alice was coming into being sometime before that pivotal exhibition at Spring Hill Gallery. Pope Alice was first launched at the 1979 at the *Swish Ball* at the Baroona RSL hall in Brisbane. And yet, it was her appearance at the Spring Hill Gallery, memorialised through the medium of video, that operates as a defining moment in what is now understood as the long and celebrated history of Pope Alice. Having weathered turbulent cosmic storms that whipped up damning conservative politics, generated cultural cringe in a provincialised late twentieth century Brisbane, and denied the rights of LGBTIQ people, Pope Alice and her noble envoy, Luke Roberts, are nothing if not stoic. It is fitting, then, to see Pope Alice's life and work canonised at this milestone anniversary. For four decades, Pope Alice has not wavered in her benevolent quest to, as she says, "free humankind from the darkness of superstitions by demonstrating how art can be the light, from which violence and humanity flees".⁵ Let us hope that we continue to bask in Her Divine Holiness's light for a long time yet, as she travels the lands, blessing its contents and seeks comity for all.

¹ 40 years of Pope Alice: Luke Roberts & Dr Laini Burton In Conversation. Produced by Griffith University Art Museum, 8 October 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEBmsbAn2aY&feature=youtu.be>

² Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and his world*, trans. Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968, pp. 39-40.

³ Szulakowska, Ursula. 'Luke Roberts'. In *Eyeline* Vol 10, 17-20, 1989.

⁴ Helmrich, Michelle. 'Wunderkammer Kunstkamera: Luke Roberts'. In *Eyeline* Vol 27, Autumn/Winter, 22-25, 1995.

⁵ Pope Alice, Mission to Planet Earth. www.popealice.com/mission-to-planet-earth