

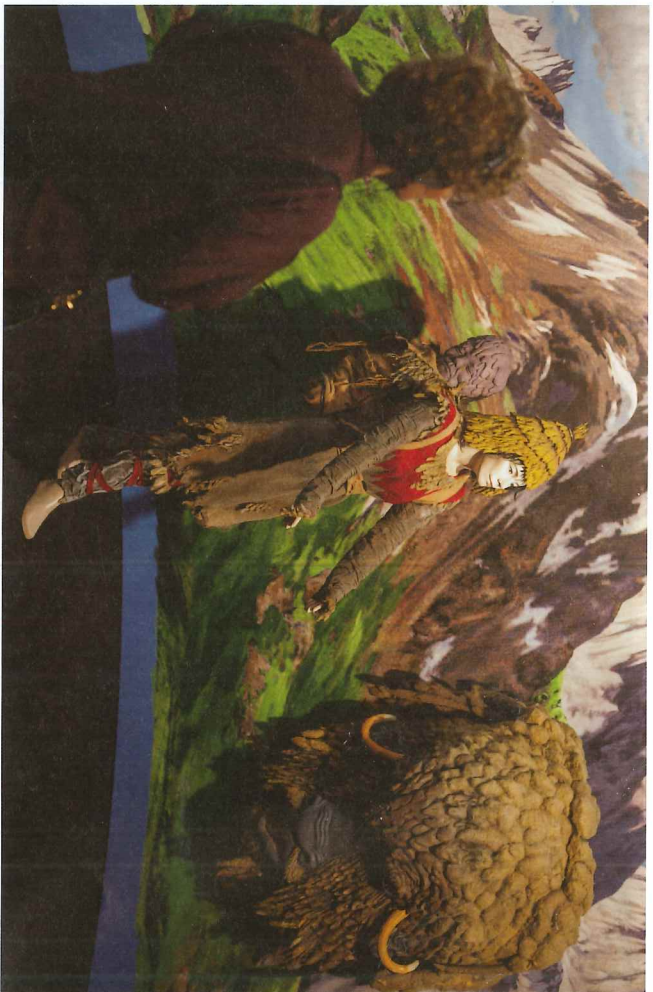
Björk 'Songlines' at Museum of Modern Art, New York City

A COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

In viewing Björk's 'museum retrospective,' I found myself trying to understand why so many critics had not only panned 'Songlines,' but were calling for its curator's resignation. New York Times art critic Roberta Smith dismissed MoMA's 'scant, cramped overview' for failing to match Björk's ambition, as epitomized by her amazing music videos, stunning costumes, inspiring lyrics, and mind-blowing performances. Said critics seem to forget that music industry budgets allocated to studio recordings, post-production, videos, and marketing dwarf museum exhibition budgets. Critic Jiljian Mapes called the V&A's 'David Bowie Is' the single greatest museum experience she'd ever had, leaving 'Songlines' dead on arrival. Critics worry that MoMA's labyrinth doesn't fit 100 people, yet I found myself all alone more than once. Smith and her ilk expected this retrospective to demystify Björk's genius.

Hardly a retrospective, 'Songlines' is rather a single work, a soundscape (in the vein of Janet Cardiff's many 'audio walks') that invites visitors to wander, not just contemplate objects. When listeners don't enjoy what they hear, a quasi-autobiographical fairy tale written by Icelandic poet/novelist Sjóón, they can easily trip the script, just by entering the next room. Thus, Smith's criticism that the soundscape requires "more than twice the time needed to take in the material at hand" is unjustified. This 'story of a girl,' strung from sound bites clipped from Björk's first seven albums, eschews a fairy tale ending, as revealed in 'Black Lake' (2015), a double-screen music video commissioned especially for this exhibition that employs 49 speakers, not unlike Cardiff's 'The Forty Part Motet' (2001). Were Björk's relationship with Matthew Barney forever, this soundscape would feel no less appropriate. Plenty of details indicate that facts have been tweaked to inscribe this story. For example, Björk and Barney never married, and the 'Wanderlust' lyrics and video didn't originally address motherhood, but the soundscape suggests otherwise. Unlike most autobiographies, the emotional rollercoaster described here holds universal appeal.

Smith longs for "many more engrossing objects" such as Alexander McQueen's 2004 'Bell Dress',



Installation view of 'Björk,' The Museum of Modern Art, © 2015, The Museum of Modern Art, photo Jonathan Muzikar

a dress adorned with 1000s of jingle bells and performed by Björk during her 'Who Is It' video, directed by Dawn Shadforth. While Bowie's show featured 300 objects culled from his personal archives, the vast majority of Björkiana (Smith's term) exhibited here are lent by original fabricators, suggesting that far fewer things remain than critics imagine. That Björk lent only sketchbooks and notebooks indicates her production model, whereby she owns her songs, though not their related props, costumes, sets, or videos. Rather than employing people to perform particular tasks, the entrepreneurial Björk has routinely invited burgeoning music video directors, sculptors, musicians, fashion designers, wig makers and scores more to collaborate, thus granting them ownership of their creations. One imagines her working contemporaneously with numerous collaborators on multiple videos. In Robert Smithson's terms, Björk's worldly songs are sites, because they pervade airwaves, the Internet, our heads, sound systems, and dance floors, while the handful of exhibitable Björkiana are nonstes.

On this level, 'Songlines' can be read through several lenses. On one hand, it exposes this diva's operatic approach, a collaborative practice that lets Björk perform (or record) her scores in vastly different styles, as she teams up with myriad music video directors, recording engineers, and musi-

cians whether folk singers, pop singers, classical musicians, jazz musicians, experimental instrumentalists, and hundreds more. Songs listed on her website credit dozens of performers. Posing the 'Womanhood' analogy to the film 'Boyhood', we witness the 27-year old classically-trained ingénue of 'Debut' transform into the 49-year old prima donna of 'Vulnicura'. Her lyrics' intimate and sensual details touch millions of hearts that yearn to feel more deeply. Finally, 'Songlines' subtly pays tribute to the music video as an artistic genre all its own.

At some point, MoMA capitulated to the reality that the radiant Björk is a massive life force, whose world is too vast to be encapsulated in any exhibition. MoMA's hubris has been to bill 'Songlines' as a retrospective, despite the fact that this extremely modest affair offers audiences only a sliver of her enduring creative endeavors. 'Songlines' is rather a telescope that highlights Björk's incredible role in inspiring musicians, fashion designers, video directors, and poets, encouraging audiences to recognize her presence all around them.

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Björk 'Songlines' until 7 June at Museum of Modern Art, New York City, USA. www.moma.org