

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian
We gotta get out of this place! The artists snared by the lure of the Labyrinth
Charlotte Higgins
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From Daedalus's prison to Mark Wallinger's plaques, labyrinths have always intrigued artists. Our writer makes a beeline to a new show inspired by their confounding paths



In a tangle ... detail of Mark Wallinger's Labyrinth #63, created for Embankment tube station, London. Photograph: Mark Wallinger/courtesy the artist and Hauser&Wirth, London

When Charlotte Schepke, director of the London gallery Large Glass, told me she wanted to organise an exhibition inspired by my book *Red Thread*, it felt like the ultimate compliment. Not only because it is obviously flattering but because the book, which explores the idea of the labyrinth, is partly about translations between art forms – how a poem might prompt a sculpture, which then might slip into a story, and how this chain of influence never ends, as ideas pass from hand to hand. In the book I consider the idea of the labyrinth – the mythical, confounding prison made by Daedalus to house the Minotaur – as the original symbol of human inventiveness and imagination. I think of Daedalus as the first great artist and contriver of ingenious forms – a figure whose creations sometimes bypassed morality or overreached nature. I think of the labyrinth as a structure that, when viewed from above, with its coiled and snaking form, resembles the brain. It is fitting that one of the photographs the Irish artist Dorothy Cross is showing in the exhibition is an image of brain coral – which simultaneously resembles the interlocking passages of a maze and the grooves of a human brain. Another work by Cross contains two skulls, halved, their hollow insides gilded. The gold picks out tributaries and rivulets of bone, which make their own little confounding maze of lines.

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For the exhibition, titled *In the Labyrinth*, Schepke has invited seven artists to make new work or select recent work suggested by the theme. Only one, Mark Wallinger, actually appears in *Red Thread*; I like the notion that the exhibition is an expansion rather than an adaptation, a new journey for the idea to travel on, prompted by fresh conversations and different eyes.

Wallinger will show two of his labyrinth plaques originally conceived for the London Underground. Each of London's 270 tube stations has one of these plaques, and each labyrinth is slightly different. The designs recall, in their circular form, Frank Pick's classic London Transport roundel and they are made by the same firm that produces the network's enamel signage.

They act as a reminder of the vermicular tangle of tunnels that makes up the Underground, the disorienting nature of the city and the looping daily journeys of the city's inhabitants. Because the signs are unexplained, unlabelled – and perhaps because they do not look like “art” – they have a slightly esoteric air to them, as if they are conveying some secret message. I always snap Wallinger's tube labyrinths on my phone when I see them, though I'm a long way from collecting a full set. Helen Mirra, who is based in California, is an artist deeply interested in the possibilities of walking and weaving, both of which are activities closely related to the idea of the labyrinth – the labyrinth must, after all, be travelled on foot and navigated, if you are lucky, with the help of a thread. Her new work for the show is a woven cloth depicting a labyrinth pattern – her chosen form echoes that of a graffito, made in about 1200 BC, on the back of a clay tablet in Pylos, Greece.

The story of Minos, Ariadne and Theseus has antique origins, and fragments of it appear in Homer. But the first telling of the story that brings all its now recognisable elements together comes many centuries after the Pylos graffito, in a poem by the Roman poet Catullus from the first century BC. He tells how king Minos of Crete commissioned Daedalus to build a labyrinth to house the half-man, half-bull Minotaur; how Minos demanded that young men and women from Athens should be let loose in it to be killed by the creature; how one year Theseus was among those chosen to be the human tribute; how Ariadne, Minos's daughter, fell in love with the prince, and gave him a sword to kill the Minotaur and a thread to find his way out. And how, in the end, Theseus betrayed Ariadne, and abandoned her on the island of Naxos.

In the poem, however, this tale is told as a story within a story: the narrative unfolds as a description of a series of scenes embroidered on a precious textile, a coverlet for a marriage bed. But reading it, you become immersed in the story, forgetting that it's made up of threads until the poet deftly reminds you. (And of course it's not, not really – it's made up of words, which are themselves mere inky flourishes on the page.) It's entirely appropriate that Mirra is, in some way, travelling that journey in reverse, returning text to textile.

Threads are also lines, and we make lines, or loops, when we walk. Mirra's interest in walking puts me in mind of another great Californian walker, the writer and activist Rebecca Solnit, who once wrote about how the labyrinth “winds up a path

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like thread on a spool". The labyrinth compresses a walk, it condenses a line. The walk one takes through a labyrinth is an unnecessarily long one, as the path veers away from its goal and doubles up and tangles itself up like a ball of wool. Weaving is an act of compression in its own way, too, a looping path taken by threads that would make a long line (or an unnavigable tangle) if unravelled.

A work in the show deeply involved in this idea of compression is Alice Channer's raffishly titled sculpture, Elon Musk. It consists of tightly pleated lamé material packed into a flattish metal structure designed to be fitted low down on a wall, jutting out from it like a bracket. The sculpture is meant to recall bracket fungi, those mycological wonders that protrude shelf-like from the trunks of trees.

Indeed, the folds of fabric, prepared specially for Channer by a firm that pleats material for the fashion industry, resemble the gills of a mushroom (and it's a nice coincidence, an unlooked-for connection, that the natural dyes Mirra has used for her weaving come from fungi). At the centre of the intestinal, coiling mass of fabric sits an ammonite, another form, this time ancient and natural rather than new and hi-tech, that spirals and winds.

The pleated, concentrated fabric has an association, for Channer, of the way a "computer hard drive condenses and contains a huge amount of information". As for the work's title, she regards it as deliberately "outrageous and mischievous" to name her modest sculpture after a tech entrepreneur who is an "overblown masculine ego in freefall". Musk, with his dreams of commercial space travel, is a damaged Daedalus for our times, perhaps; or maybe an Icarus, tumbling out of the sky having tried to fly too close to the sun.

I'm looking forward to seeing what the other artists – Alison Turnbull, Carey Young and Tónico Lemos Auad – bring to the exhibition, what associations the idea of the labyrinth has prompted in them. Some of the connections made will be, I imagine, clear; some more intuitive and less immediately apparent. I shall enjoy the challenge of trying to map the journeys their minds have travelled. In Chaucer, and other writers of Middle English, Ariadne's ball of thread is called a *clewe*. It's a word that comes from the Old English *cliewen*, which means a sphere, a ball, or a skein of thread. In time this old Germanic word entirely lost its material significance and became our word "clue". (Except, funnily enough, in Dutch, in which the word *kluwen* can still mean "tangle".) It means that every time we untangle a mystery, or unravel a complicated chain of associations, we are being helped by Ariadne's thread. I shall follow it, wherever it leads, in this new labyrinth.

In the Labyrinth is at Large Glass, London, from 8 February to 5 April.