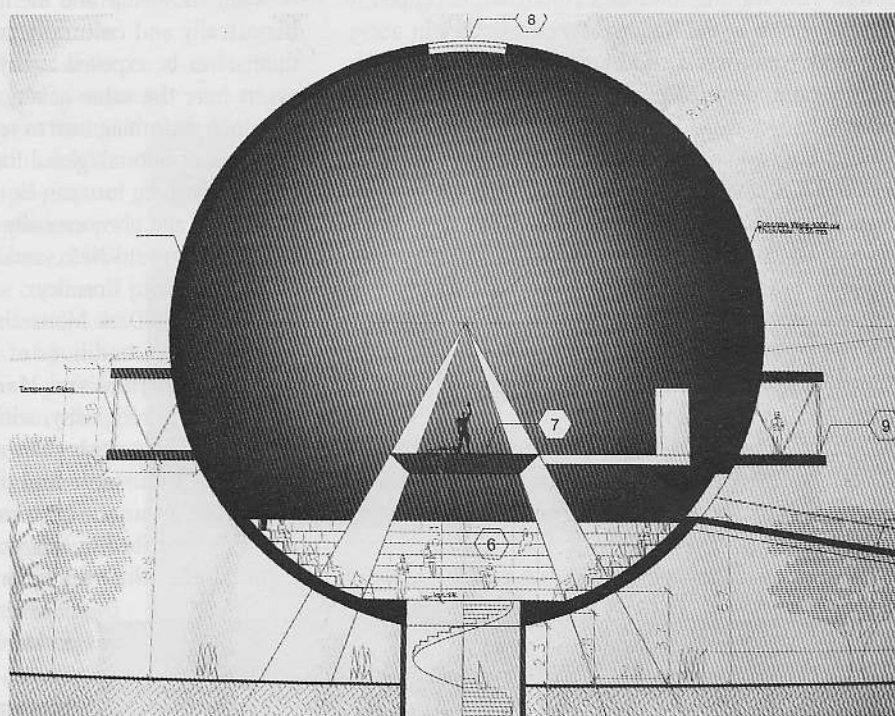


Over the past decade there have been a number of practices seeking to explore entanglements between contemporary art and a resurgence of interest in faith and belief. This seems to correspond to a heightened awareness of the forces of religion shaping global politics, particularly as Judeo-Christian and Islamic manifestations. Yet there are also interests in history, in social margins, in fantasies of subjectivity. What these practices share is not only a fascination for aspects of religiosity, often overlooked or archaic in character, but also a powerfully critical and reflexive dimension, able to excavate and translate redemptive forces.

This operation is present in some of the most dramatic and public works of Francis Alÿs. Participatory strategies are mobilised that, at least in part, reflect a desire to explore and enact forms of religiosity. Notably, *When Faith Moves Mountains*, 2002, identifies itself – through an act of naming – as not just a large-scale intervention within a site, but as a gesture of a different, more ambivalent sort. Although Alÿs describes the work as ‘a project of linear geological displacement’, there is an unambiguous allusion to the miraculous. Taking place outside Lima, the shifting of a sand dune by four inches through the labour of hundreds of volunteers, arranged in a line and equipped with shovels, alludes to work, to community, to the creation of narrative, of myth and, more explicitly, to the masses that occupy the city and the shantytowns that spring up among these desert outskirts. There is a demonstration of social allegory and social reality, of geographical place, and



Ben Judd
I Will Heal You 2007
detail

New Maps of Heaven

what Alÿs calls a landscape of narrative. Yet the work also operates as a verifiable miracle, evidence of collective possibility. It is a material thaumaturgy. Faith here can be read as an investment in concrete utopian possibility, working in the present to bring about a resolved transformation in the future.

A more ceremonial dimension of religiosity is brought to light in *The Modern Procession*, 2002 (see AM280 and 328). The work was commissioned for MoMA's temporary move during the rebuilding of the museum, and followed the path of relocation from Manhattan to Queens across the Queensboro bridge. This was a simulation of a Catholic procession, complete with carried replicas of artworks from the collection, and the actual artist Kiki Smith. This leaning towards Catholicism is echoed in *Fabiola*, shown at the National Portrait Gallery in 2009. The work comprises a collection of images of a fourth-century saint, depicted in profile, her head covered by a red veil, known as the Fabiola. She became popular in the 19th century, giving rise to a cult which was part of a huge revival of Catholicism. All of the images gathered together share a source, a portrait by Jean-Jacques Henner painted in 1885, which has long since been lost. Nevertheless, it serves as a prototype for both printed copies and painted reproductions. The collection that Alÿs has built up from antique shops and markets in Europe is made up of copies, but each is part of a larger network of artefacts with their own sacred power.

Within a specifically British context, the recent exhibition 'The Dark Monarch' at Tate St Ives presented a curatorial framework for making connections between magic and modernity, between forces aligned with progressive, enlightenment values and a darker world of

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the irrational. 'The Dark Monarch' suggested an erosion of the boundaries between knowledge and the irrational which, through their identification as historically and culturally contingent narratives of differentiation, may themselves be exposed as mythic and illusory oppositions. I would like to assert here the value of engaging with enchantment as a counter to the genuinely disturbing turn to religiosity. This might be interpreted not just as a broad set of cultural, global forces, but as effects sought within contemporary art. This ongoing turn can be thought of as a desire for artworks that trade on sensational and phenomenally dramatic impact – recognisable in works by Bill Viola and Ernesto Neto, and in the immersive installations and situations created by Antony Gormley.

While 'The Dark Monarch' was aligned more with gothic and fantastic narratives than traditions of belief and religiosity, recent works by Olivia Plender, Ben Judd and Marcus Coates engage more particularly with approaches to religiosity, while still aligned with the impulses within that exhibition. These artists share a particular set of evaluative insights which have the ability to unsettle and disorder cognitive expectations. Rather than overseeing an uncritical restoration of faith, belief and wonderment, the practices described in this feature involve scrutiny as well as interest, and disturb rather than reinforce relationships between past and present. For Plender there is an attention to faith and belief which is intersected by historical and archival research. There is also an emphasis upon social formations and political movements, drawn out of the past, retrieved as questions that reframe the present, and as possible futures. *The Empire City*, shown at Gasworks in 2009, presented a scale model of the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley. The representation of the view of the world through empire is reconstructed. The shaping of pervasive ideologies of progress are exposed through the partial recreation of the exhibition and the desire to configure the public realm. The event has obvious corollaries with the Millennium Dome and the

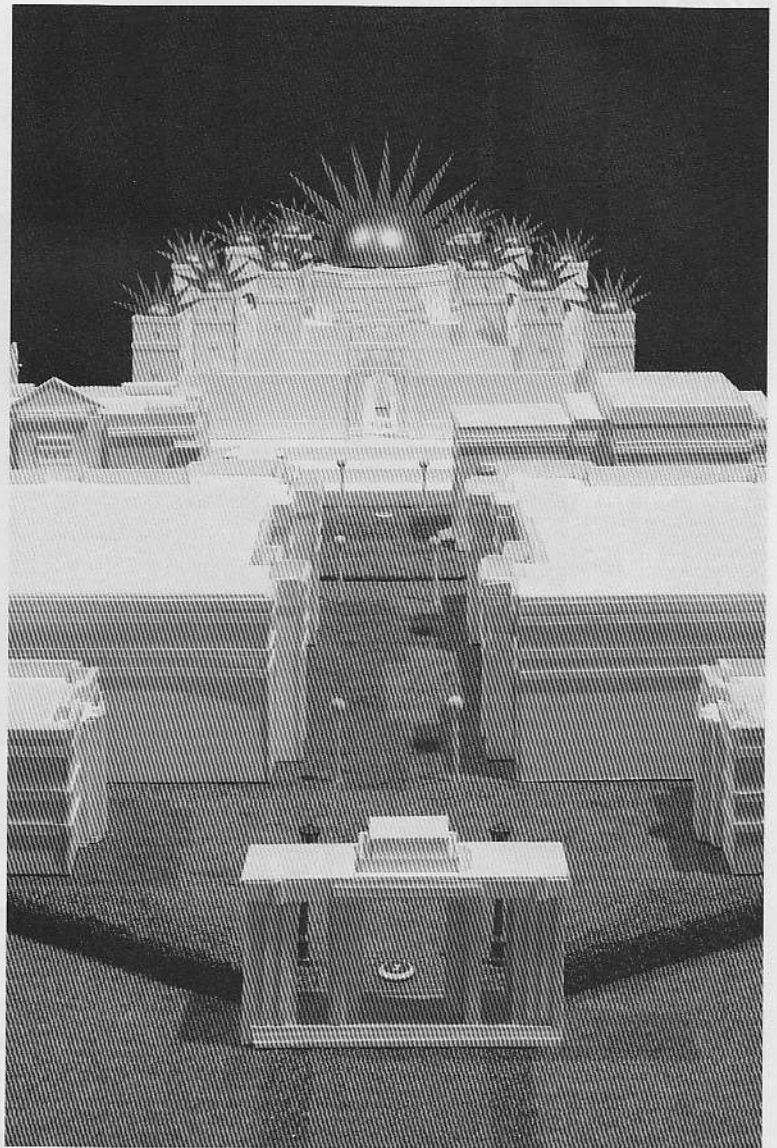
2012 Olympics. However, the scale model includes a representation of the Celestial City, the manifestation of Heaven on Earth, not only fictionalising the recreation but introducing another dimension of hope and progress.

The promise of this New Jerusalem resonates through much of Plender's work, exemplified by her graphic novel *A Stellar Key to the Summerland*, 2007. Here the focus is on Spiritualism, described in the introduction by the deceased Andrew Jackson Davis via spirit communication as 'the religion for the age of reason'. Charting an account of the origins of the movement, the narrative is set within the recent memory of the move to the US of the Shakers and the establishing of the Mormons, a context of radical social and religious formations. Plender draws attention, for example, to Robert Owen's alignment with the movement. Owen, an archetypal utopian who founded the co-operative movement, is quoted as declaring 'Socialism until united with Spiritualism: a body without a soul'. Through a practice that deploys historiographic

methodologies, Plender mines social and esoteric beliefs that disturb contemporary expectations. The illumination of alternative formations and beliefs in the past offers a redress to the apparent inevitability of the social and economic topographies of the present. Plender links together dream geographies with political ones, through historical and archival excavations.

Judd approaches a closely related terrain of esoteric beliefs through participatory and collaborative strategies manifested in performance. While operating in the shadow of Spiritualism and its legacies, Judd is conspicuously trying to believe – and generally failing. In forcing an encounter with belief, Judd is testing the limits of the performative dimension of faith, taking on a role, embodying the action, yet still not fulfilling it. There is within this work a complication of Judd's role, playing on ethnographic and journalistic tendencies yet foregrounding artifice and contrivance. *I Will Heal You*, 2007, incorporates the creation of Judd's own religious movement, founded on the inherent contradictions of Judd's participation in acts of faith from a position of materialist atheism. The manifesto tells us 'This movement exists. It doesn't exist'. Promises are made, yet Judd informs us that this is a sham, and offers a warning to stay away. The work came out of a residency in Cali, Colombia, and a series of meetings with Verónica Mardel, a religious figure identified as a witch. Judd was interested in how she was both respected within her community, and yet feared and excluded. Judd subjected himself to Mardel's ritualistic practices and took her organised quasi religion, 'The Ministry of Universal Culture', as a starting point for the creation of his own organisation.

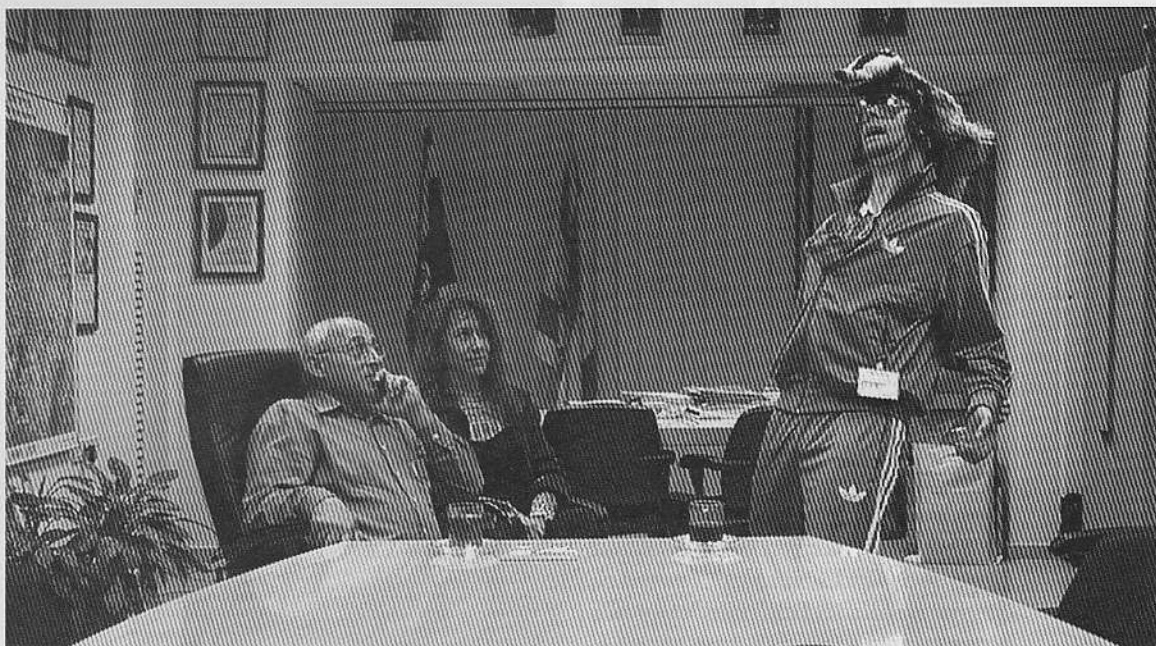
In *Close To You*, 2008, Judd attends and documents a meeting for inexperienced mediums. These beginners are encouraged to make contact and to share their experiences with the rest of the group. As a participant, Judd's own apparently irresolvable tensions of scepticism and the desire to believe are framed by an implied ethical responsibility. This sense of responsibility is tied to the possibility of his communicating, to an audience of believers, a fraudulently numinous experience while nevertheless trying his hardest to genuinely experience something. Marcus Coates shares Judd's interest in this terrain. He taps into a history of the integration of the spirit guide as exotic figure in spiritualist practices. Ethnographic research and folklore studies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries popularised the belief systems of different cultures; for instance, there was an appetite for the myths and beliefs of Native American tribes such as the Lakota and the Hopi, and photography – both moving and still – and images of their rituals, ceremonies and magic were widely disseminated. Both photography and museum collections were vital as repositories of memory and as such became saturated by the presence of magic, which leaked into archival and museological structures. These can



Olivia Plender
The Empire City 2009
architectural model

Marcus Coates

The Plover's Wing (The
Palestinian/Israeli Crisis) 2008
production still showing the Mayor
of Holon, his interpreter
and Marcus Coates



then be imagined as spaces of enchantment and keepers of talismans, an idea that is explored in Marina Warner's 2006 book *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media*.

Coates turns this strand of magical religiosity, assimilated from other cultures yet subsequently recognised as traditions of folk belief in the British Isles, into a form of social engagement which manages to be both bizarrely ridiculous yet poignant. This spirit guide can then find opportunities to perform miracles while asking people to identify specific concerns. In channelling an animal spirit, he will communicate some form of metaphoric insight into the situation. In *The Plover's Wing*, 2009, Coates performs for the mayor of Holon (and his interpreter) in Israel, providing a parable of an overprotective bird defending its nest. Unlike Judd, Coates does not break out of character, projecting nothing but absolute faith in his own apparent experience. The sheer atavistic ridiculousness, tinged with a remnant of exoticism, of his spirit guide is a source of estrangement and disorientation. For Coates, communicating with animals takes on a tactical role, not just to destabilise the participating audience but also to set in motion an unstable contextualisation of his own role.

Within all of these practices there is a political dimension, made possible by the grounding of religiosity, faith and belief in social reality. This may be an understated impulse, but it can be addressed through an argument presented by Ernst Bloch, the German philosopher of utopia. He writes in *Atheism and Christianity*, 1972, that religion needs to be seen in terms of a construction around concrete utopia as a latent tendency. For atheism to be built up as something more than nihilism, he argues that it is necessary to engage with, and even participate in, religion. He calls for a burning away of the illusory paradise of the Other-world. What remains signals 'the way to the fulfilled This-world of a new earth'. There is, therefore, a future-orientated force in this desire, played out in artworks, to engage with religiosity through complex engagements with social and historical formations and encounters. While both ideology and religion offer reassuring and consistent narratives of being, these artists draw on our own desire for enchantment, yet create encounters that are reflexive, critical and unstable. ■

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