

Ben Judd: Ethnographies of Modern Magic, or, Am I Imagining This?



In Ben Judd's performances and videos, he enacts ethnographies of subcultures of the modern western world. From street preachers to witches, professional psychics to utopian communities, what unites these diverse groups is that they all partake in ritualistic activities, or performances. The videos in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* all share the common feature of being documentations of performances of one sort or another, whether primarily intended for a live audience or produced exclusively for the footage; stumbled upon, readymade, in the streets of London or carefully scripted and performed by actors. Several of the works combine all of these elements. They are never straightforward documentaries, a concept Judd's work inherently complicates.

The ethnographies Judd performs have a levelling effect: lunatics and believers, artists and visionaries are treated alike, often to the result of uncovering

surprising commonalities among them. 'I work with music, colours and the weather!' proclaims a street Jesus in a red feather boa in *The Truth Will Set You Free* (2005), though they could just as easily be the words of Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist and mystic whose synaesthetic visions form the foundation of a later work. In the earlier video and its accompanying *In This Wonderful Country I* (2005), phrases lifted from preachers at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park are re-performed by musicians, buskers and improvisatory artists. Though the juxtaposition of the evangelists' rabid vociferation and the gentle vocals and guitar strumming is at times jarring, it also has a clear logic: the idyllic society described by the street preachers lends itself well to folk music's own brand of idealism. At the same time, the contrapuntal footage and its overlapped voices convey the innate contradictions of the subject matter – utopia – while the process of re-enactment mimics the art making

process: delusion sublimated, distanced, interpreted.

The artist consistently implicates himself in complex ways. One of his most ambitious projects, *I Will Heal You* (2007), arose out of a residency in Cali, Colombia. Judd consulted a witch, a parapsychologist and a scientologist in order to construct his very own religion. The eponymous movement manifested in the development of specialised architecture, clothing, jewellery and music. In the video we witness how far Judd goes for his research: the witch has him perform a ritual that involves rubbing his naked body with eggs and limes, then stand inside a blazing circle. Footage of Judd's endeavours is set against the charming tunes of Colombian and Argentinean street musicians singing the words of the visited seers. From this melee of sources arise questions of belief, not least of all the artist's own. The resulting doctrine, which at once entices would-be believers and warns them of fraudulence, embodies Judd's own position of intrigued scepticism.



From this standpoint, Judd neither mocks nor romanticises the belief systems he examines. He circumvents the pitfall of glorifying the marginalised positions of outsider groups, as Hal Foster warns against in 'The Artist as Ethnographer?'.⁽¹⁾ The groups featured are themselves frequently atavistic, exoticising: witches, pagans, a white Canadian shaman. The artist's relationship to and within the groups likewise complicates notions of

otherness. By positioning himself within the anthropological tradition of participant observation, he manages to infiltrate various communities as both potential member and documentarist, student and sceptic. The viewer hence adopts this dualistic mindset: one watches videos Judd made with the psychic medium Val Hood, both ready with apprehension and eager to be proven wrong. For *Close To You* (2008), Judd enrolled in Hood's course on how to be psychic. Like the other wannabe clairvoyants in the class, we empathise with the artist's struggle to conjure and convey a visiting spirit. Through the camera's periodic lingering on banal details of the community hall setting – a ramshackle kitchenette, an old filing cabinet, a notice board – the supernatural is united with the mundane realities within which it might manifest. As Judd describes the spirit, we wonder how much of it is in his head, and if it really makes a difference.

In *The Symbol* (2009), shot in the Canadian Rockies, a suburban shaman with a pick-up truck offers a similarly transcendental experience. Giving the artist a lesson on talking to trees, he exclaims, 'if you think, "oh I'm imagining this", you're right, because your imagination is nothing more than your energetic level kicking in'. This strangely makes sense. The liminal atmosphere in which the unknown may transpire continues in Judd's collaboration with Norwegian artist Sidsel Christiansen. In *Conversations with the Other Side* (2009), Christiansen, put under a trance, acts as a medium to the spirit world. Here technology plays a pivotal role, as both her trance state and her physical location behind a wall place her on 'the other side', with only video to mediate. Her projected image, and Judd's interpretations – moving the projector around to simulate the feelings she describes and drawing what she sees – introduces yet another level of uncertainty, albeit one normally taken for granted.

While Judd's earlier works tended to document the activities of society's fringe groups – trainspotters, amateur

photography clubs, Morris dancers – more recently he has engaged in recreating their practices, as with the wiccan ceremony performed in the Barbican Art Gallery in *Observance* (2009), and eventually inventing his own rituals, seen in the elaborately choreographed, almost operatic performances of the past couple years. In this development, Judd has expanded an investigation of the nature of belief into a highly involved study of the components of its rituals.

Observance opens with six druidic figures, black cloaked, faces painted and heads adorned with floral wreaths, 'casting a circle' around a Hans Haacke sculpture. Again, it quickly becomes apparent that the rituals of spiritual belief and modern art are not far off. With each elaborate phase of the witches' rite, other artworks from the Barbican's *Radical Nature* exhibition are drawn in and made sacred; as in *I Will Heal You*, architecture and display proves itself fundamental. Rather than perverting the pagan sacrament, the performance moreover appears to take the Mickey out of the supposed dialectic between spirituality and the avowedly secular institution of modern art and its 'church', the art museum. Authenticity is likewise questioned here: in the penultimate 'celebration' stage of the ritual, the actors let their guard down in idle chat. But, we are reminded, religiosity and belief always involve acting. Judd connects this to liturgical drama, in which the players are acutely aware that they are part of a performance.(2) Meanwhile, the actors' banter gives way to new creative concepts: they discuss the phenomenon of oddly tantalising smells, one woman admitting to the desire to eat the smell of wet swimming pool grout, another subtle infiltration of synaesthesia.

Judd's investigation into the performative and its relationship to text comes into its own in *Polyrhythm* (2009). Several actors descend on New York's bustling Union Square uttering, sometimes singing, sections of speeches by Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Barack Obama. Here the artist moves

away from organised religion and the supernatural towards the persuasive powers of language and performance itself. Homi Bhabha describes the performative agency of language, how rhetoric takes on aesthetic properties of its own in a veritable 'affect of rhetoricity' – representation is not relegated as secondary reflection. (3) Removed from their original contexts, the disembodied speech-parts in Judd's performance become floating signifiers, charged objects in their own right. They reduce and decontextualise important historical moments and yet equally distil the spirit of their original context. Set to music and movement, their carefully scripted symmetry is echoed by the actors' choreography.

The most recent work continues this union of ritual and rhetoric. *Concerning the Difference Between the Delights of Pleasure and True Happiness* (2010) documents a live performance at the Swedenborg House, London. Eight actors embedded in the audience gradually make themselves known, in turns reciting texts selected from Swedenborg's prolific output. Their pace echoes the feverish writings of the scientist-turned-mystic; building into a crescendo, they excitedly repeat the text in rounds, accompanied by escalating instrumentals and movement. In contrast to the measured political rhetoric in *Polyrhythm*, Swedenborg's writing engages the spirits and the cosmos. His evocative descriptions of lunar lights, visiting angels and shapeshifting birds are beautifully illustrated by the accompanying projections of a magic lantern. With its whirling otherworldly imagery, ranging from astrology to abstract patterns, the nineteenth-century instrument appears to transcend time. Again, Judd constructs synchronicity between the textual and performative content. Words, image and music unite in a multisensory opus, reflecting Swedenborg's own synaesthetic experiences.

Recently, Judd has continued to explore the Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art. He has drawn on other

historical visionary philosophers and artists, including the French Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire and Russian composer Alexander Scriabin – the title, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, derives from a William Blake poem – as well as the beliefs and rituals of religious sects such as the Shakers. What unites these seemingly disparate sources is their shared utopian visions, which like the *gesamtkunstwerk*, insist on a totalitarian application. For Scriabin this resulted in the *Mysterium*, an impracticable opera in which props hung from clouds; for the Shakers it manifested in the design of unique furniture to serve their ideal society. Such visions resonate with the street preacher's 'wonderful country', where disease and natural disasters are abolished. In recent performances, as with the earlier works, the artist as ethnographer performs his fieldwork through an intimate act of interpolation. Whether through subtle interventions or elaborate orchestrations, applying the language of utopia – of seers and of Shakers – or inventing his own ritualistic language – including image, sound and movement – Judd illuminates these liminal subject positions.

1 Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer?', in *The Return of the Real* (MIT, 1996).

2 Conversation with the artist, 10 March 2012.

3 Homi Bhabha 'The Humanities and the Anxiety of Violence', lecture, University College London, 14 June 2010.

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