

## It's a kind of magic

What separates art from the world of magicianship? Very little, discovers Adrian Searle, after seeing three shows that make him question reality

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Three avocados, each carefully wrapped in a folded page of an Arizona newspaper, sit in a bowl on a window sill. The paper's headlines, dated July 21 1969, proclaim the moon landing of the day before. We are unlikely to get much from Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri's *The Recurrence of the Sublime* unless we follow an elliptical train of thought that takes us from Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon to the appearance of this bowl of wrapped fruit in a London art gallery, 37 years later. One small step for mankind leads to a leap of the imagination, to retrace the labyrinthine process of Kuri's thought.

In the same exhibition, *Open-Ended*, at Thomas Dane gallery, there is a photograph of a lone orator at Speaker's Corner in London. This is by Belgian artist Michel François. The man has a home-made cardboard sign draped around his neck. It reads: "I'm very clever. I know everything.

Tomorrow will be too late. It's now or never. My word won't wait." There's no reason to believe that this guy is not for real, except that he stands not on a soapbox but a very large block of ice. A sage whose theories are all his own, he could well be a living monument to a belief or an idea taken too far, up there on his slowly melting plinth. Before too long, he'll be bought back down to earth, however urgent his message.

Art now is often a matter of faith. It demands, like theatre, a certain suspension of disbelief, or at least a willingness to engage in its language games and twisted semantics. Michael Craig-Martin's famous transubstantiation of a glass of water into an oak tree, Joseph Beuys' symbolic uses of fat and felt, and Duchamp's gesture by which a urinal is transformed into an artwork called *Fountain*, in which some observers have even discerned a reference to the Virgin Mary, are all examples of art whose appearance and form is at odds with the stories they have to tell, and the further stories that have accumulated about them since their conception. There are those who believe that there was something, if not evil, then dangerous and destructive about Duchamp's ideas, and heap all that is wrong with art today on his shoulders, as though he were some kind of evil magus.

And what of Tommy Angel, stage magician, illusionist and burning-bible thumping "gospel magician"? Like François's deluded soapbox man, he wants us



Read my lips ... Tommy Angel #8 by Jonathan Allen

to believe in what can't be proved. Angel is in fact the invention of artist Jonathan Allen, who has cast himself in the role of gospel evangelist, with his sparkly suit and too-perfect smile. His persuasive powers are those of the stage illusionist, with his seamless patter, his boxes of tricks, his smoke and mirrors and misdirections. When I met Allen, briefly, last week, he was negotiating the hire of a live lion for a new act, in which he wished to replicate the story of St Jerome.

A number of large black and white photographs of Tommy Angel are currently at David Risley Gallery. In one, the apparently headless illusionist proffers his own head above a platter, in the manner of a self-decapitated John the Baptist. In another, he seems to be pronouncing some spooky incantation over the pages of a burning bible. He does a Piero della Francesca number with a bunch of white doves, the Holy Ghost fluttering aloft. Even his wand is in the shape of a cross. In the most alarming image, he's a ventriloquist, with a diminutive, bug-eyed, bearded dummy of Christ, replete with painted stigmata on his hands and feet. Tommy and his prop, then, as Virgin and Child. You could say that the sarcasm and perhaps blasphemy of Tommy Angel is the direct opposite of the hand-wringing gospel video art of Bill Viola. Allen straddles the professional magic world as well as the art world (in 2003 he assisted illusion designer Paul Kieve with his work for the film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*), and appears to want to be taken seriously, or perhaps not-so-seriously, by both camps. Next month, he'll be performing at Tate Britain.

The satirical side of Allen's work is also an attack on the Elmer Gantry, hysterical-theatrics style of evangelical fundamentalism. One is also never quite certain where illusion begins and ends. Reading, in his publicity material, that he "has been described as a meeting of Billy Graham and David Copperfield via Donald Rumsfeld", I have a faint suspicion that Allen wrote the line, just as he has invented a fake back story for Tommy Angel, including a lapsed Italian catholic upbringing and a fundamentalist stepmother from Utah. He is, in fact, from Surrey.

Allen is not the first artist to dabble in magic, or to work with stage tricks and illusions. You could say that, one way or another, most artists work with the latter. The late Juan Muñoz created several works about card tricks (including his collaboration with Gavin Bryars, *A Man in a Room Gambling*) and illusions. Art's illusions, of course, are both related to and different from the magician's act. Art, if it is any good, always lets you know that there is a point where artifice and illusion ends. Art's manipulations of reality, and its misdirections, are constructed for more than just effect or entertainment.

Revealing how the mechanics work can also be a double bluff, a further layer of illusion. Perhaps one of the things art can play on best is our sense of uncertainty, about meaning as well as the veracity of what we encounter with our senses. In fact, meaning is something we construct for ourselves. It isn't always

handed to us, however vividly, like the head of John the Baptist, on a plate, or as obscurely and tenuously as Gabriel Kuri's wrapped avocados.

Next door to David Risley, at a gallery called Fred, Stuart Croft's film *Century City* plays on two opposing screens. On one, a detective sits in her office in Cape Town, holding a phone conversation with a movie director in Los Angeles, who appears on the other screen. It is a murder story, the complications of which needn't detain us. The acting is pretty good, the camerawork professional, the complex fragment of plot as rich and convincing, if as implausible, as many commercial films, although it is difficult to imagine many movie phone conversations going on for the eight-minute duration of this one, which coincides with the length of Croft's looped film.

The downside is the booming acoustic of the gallery, which makes the speech difficult to follow, which is a pity. The Hollywood director, played by Matthew Marsh, maunders about the set of a movie he's making while the South African detective questions him about his daughter's murder. Marsh paces around with a slimmed-down, Tony Soprano lope, slamming things and shouting. At one point he fiddles with a mock-up backdrop of a nocturnal city skyline. It is the same silhouetted skyline that appears behind the office in Cape Town on the other screen. As well as being a temporal loop, the setting for *Century City* turns out to be a kind of spatial mobius strip, one place folding into the other.

What is real here, what is illusion? The unravelling clues to the off-screen murder are spliced with references to other films, and the film Marsh is making, in the fictional *Century City*, is a remake of Jean Luc Godard's 1964 *Contempt*, whose opening scenes are set in Cinecitta, the movie studios outside Rome.

The pleasure here is of Croft's continual creation and dismantling of illusion. Something similar is happening in François's *Speakers Corner* photograph. Tommy Angel plays on our disbelief. We know these illusions aren't, so to speak, really real. But what of Gabriel Kuri's *The Recurrence of the Sublime*? Did a man really walk on the moon? Just as we never saw it for ourselves, nor can we be sure that there are avocados, wrapped in newspaper, in the bowl.