Culture

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

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 stage whose theatres 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 brought 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 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.

Read my lips... (left to right) **Century City by Stuart Croft; Tommy Angel #8 by Jonathan Allen; The Recurrence of the Sublime by Gabriel Kuri**

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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.

Adrian Searle

The Guardian 17.01.06

The Guardian
Adrian Searle
17th Jan 2006

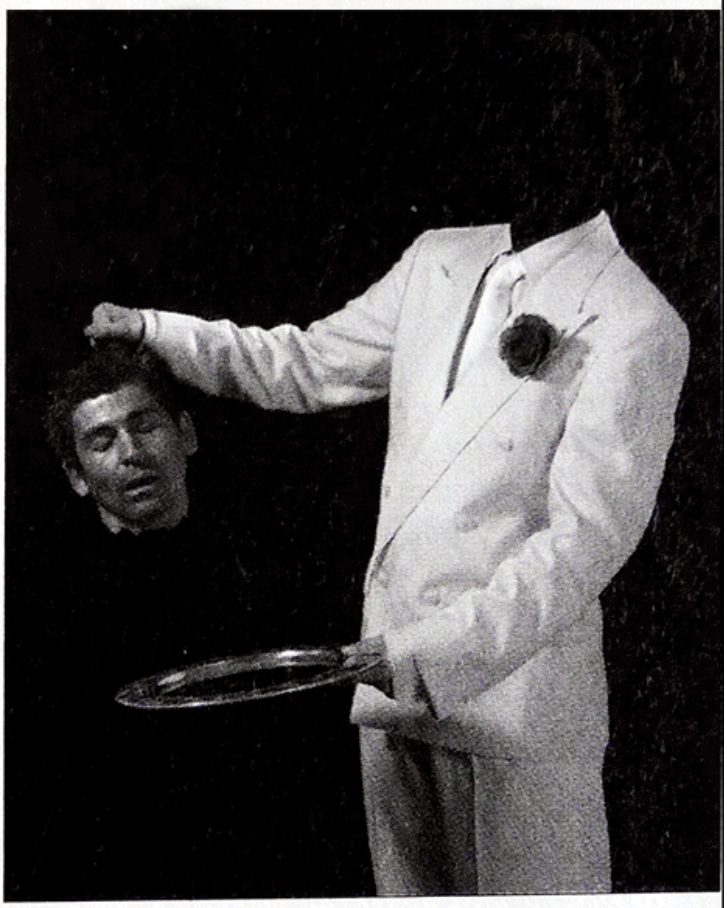
Jonathan Allen

★★★★☆☆

David Risley East End

Artist Jonathan Allen explores the intriguing relationship between performance, magic and religion. In the persona of glitzy gospel magician Tommy Angel, whose props include flaming bibles and a crucifix in the form of two white-tipped magic wands, he has performed his magic act at events such as the Zoo Art Fair and the opening programme at the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill. The performances were developed from a series of photographs and seven of these black and white images are on show. Like large-scale press shots, they show Angel in a shiny white or black velvet suit, posed as if performing a variety of gospel magic acts and illusions; he appears with a spooky-looking ventriloquist's doll of Jesus, complete with stigmata, holding a newspaper page that has been folded and torn to read 'HELL', or holding his (own) severed head over a platter.

Perhaps surprisingly, Angel's act and images are closer to truth than parody; aimed at genuine evangelists looking for new ways to spread the word, some props are available from commercial websites –



'Tommy Angel' by Jonathan Allen

which throws up the interesting paradox of preachers who use a medium based on deception to present what they believe to be ultimate truths. Factor in the idea that much visual art relies heavily on illusion, and Allen's work is not only entertaining but stimulates a lot of thought. *Helen Sumpter*

Time Out - Helen Sumpter, Jan 2006

In the mood for making an art of money

The IMF summit provides fodder for Biennale works, writes **PARVATHI NAYAR**

USUALLY, Art and Money form an unholy alliance — whether as the obscene amounts paid in auctions for the works of deceased artists or as the negligible amounts earned by living artists. But, sometimes, the alliance transcends its boundaries to become something else altogether — when money is the actual raw material for art. The niche practice was made famous by artists such as Fiona Hall — who shredded dollar bills to create fragile, woven birds' nests — or JSG Boggs — who meticulously drew one-sided US dollar notes that he exchanged for goods worth the denomination of the note.

Examples of this sort of play with money-art in the ongoing Singapore Biennale are made more subversive, thanks to the timing. For our Biennale cannot be seen as just site-specific — it is time-specific as well.

Its juxtaposition with the IMF/World Bank meetings offers a specially legitimate prism with which to view artworks dealing with forms of money or currency. There are interesting slippages; Biennale curator Sharmini Pereira points out, for example, that currency loses its "value" when rendered as art, yet the act creates something with a value of its own.

Visual culture

Money is also part of our visual culture. Ms Pereira talks of "the iconography of state and religion" present on the bank notes of a country, which magician-turned-artist Jonathan Allen exploits so well.

For his Singapore performance, he printed large quantities of one dollar bills emblazoned with his alter ego Tommy Angel. Over the past few days, he has been "put-pocketing" these dollar notes into the pockets and bags of unsuspecting Singaporeans. He has "placed" around 13,000 such notes already, and has assistants who will continue the work even after he leaves.

"Magicians understand our psychological connection with money," he says. For money has a potent role as a prop in magic, and viewers are particularly goggle-eyed when magicians "materialise" money as the proverbial rabbit from a hat.

Protest artists: *Jonathan Allen explores the spread of dangerous theologies by distributing fake bank notes (above) and Hossein Golba contests the value of money with a gold ingot (left) inscribed with the words 'Diversity is Value'*

Allen's sleight-of-hand distribution of bank notes is also suggestive of the way in which ideas — and especially the more sinister theologies — are put into circulation among people. Tommy Angel himself was created post-9/11 as a way to put a face to the more negative aspects of emerging Christian fundamentalism; he is a Billy Graham meets David Copperfield via Donald Rumsfeld sort of character.

Talk to Allen, and he takes you on a "magical" trip through the history of the magic arts via the history of gospel magic to his own roots in magic — a grandfather who was a metal worker and who made double-headed coins for him. Allen also dispenses related trivia: one of the — contested — derivations for the term "hocus pocus" is the saying *hoc est corpus* ("This is the body"), spoken during the Catholic Mass.

Allen says his fake "parodic notes" critique many discussions, such as the "homogeneity of capital that an organisation such as IMF represents. This is a fiction, for currency has specific local powers. My work is not directed against IMF; however, I did want to contribute something that could unsettle the discussion around money."

Among the other Biennale money-art artists is Jeon Joonho. In part, he plays with the power structures embedded in the US dollar notes that become the background of his video artworks *The White House* and *In God We Trust*. The latter is a phrase taken from the US dollar bill, and questions the whole business of nation building with simple devices such as people futilely asking for directions to the Independence Hall. In the more powerful *White House*, the artist "white washes" out the windows on the facade of the White House as it appears in the US$20 bill.

Obviously, the power of the dollar note does not lie in the value of its material — paper; interestingly enough, before 1971, the US dollar was pegged to gold at a fixed rate. The idea of money's "value" is contested in the work of Hossein Golba: a gold ingot inscribed with the words "Diversity is Value". It asks the question, what is it that we value — the diversity of human life or this human invention we are obsessed with, i.e., money? The artist is planning to further commodify this work by creating 1001 copies of it for sale.

Exchange value

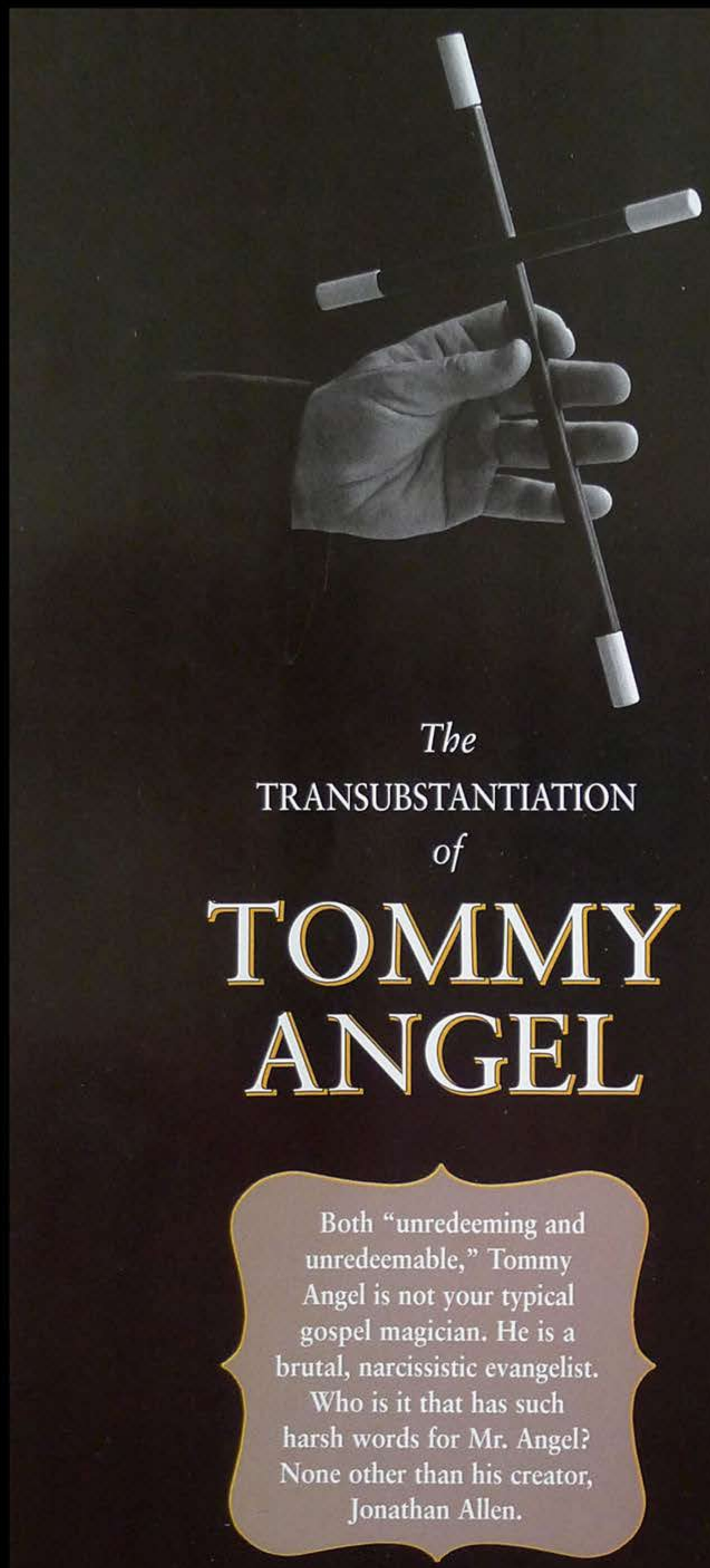
Gustavo Romano has dealt with the exchange value of money in past performances of the work *Time Notes*. However, he altered the performance in direct response to Singapore, says Ms Pereira; the artist walked down the commercial heart of Singapore, Orchard Road, letting go of "bank notes" — and recorded the responses that ensued.

Less directly, Jennifer Wen Ma offers a certain commentary on money with her video work *Alms*. Alms-giving is a tenet of all religions, but you could argue that the giving of money — at any level — is a problematic act; nations and individuals often get locked into uneasy and ultimately destructive debt situations.

Allen suggests a curious parallel between Money and Art when he talks of money as an abstraction that has been forced into representation. I walked away from the interview with the artist/magician not just with much to ponder about the currencies of art, magic and religion — but also with a Tommy Angel dollar bill that had been put-pocketed into my bag.

Singapore Biennale 2006, till Nov 12; for details of entrance fees, events, timings, tours and venues, visit www.singaporebiennale.org

The Business Times (Singapore) - Parvathi Nayar, Autumn 2006



The TRANSUBSTANTIATION *of* TOMMY ANGEL

Both "unredeeming and unredeemable," Tommy Angel is not your typical gospel magician. He is a brutal, narcissistic evangelist. Who is it that has such harsh words for Mr. Angel? None other than his creator, Jonathan Allen.

By Alan Howard
Photos By Jonathan Allen

Tommy Angel is a fictional, parodic gospel magician, the central figure in a contemporary art project that bears his name. British artist Jonathan Allen inhabits this faux religious performer, bringing him to life primarily for a continuing series of black-and-white photographs. His evocative images create a mood of combative faith, juxtaposing the world of devotional religion with that of performance conjuring.

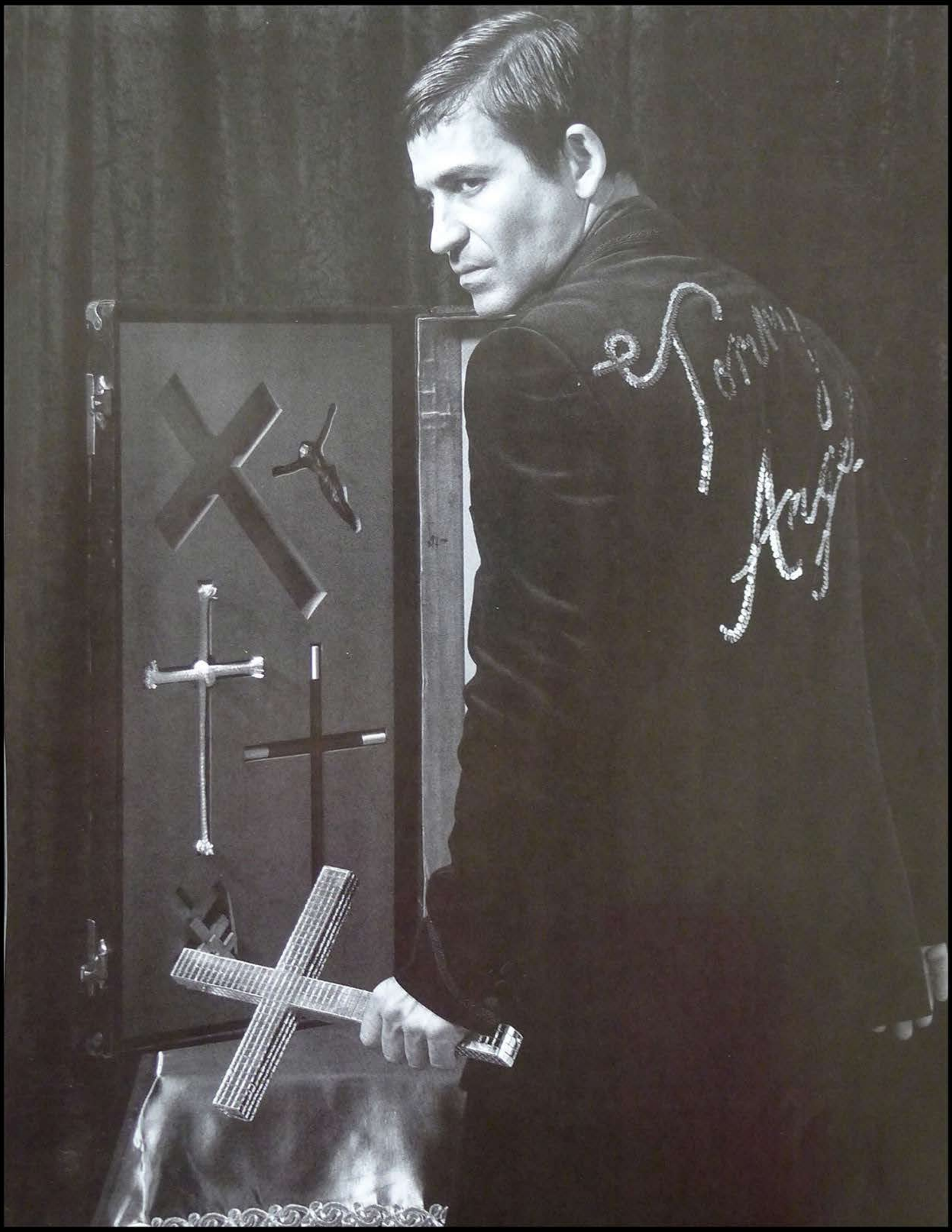
Allen's own background lies not only in the visual arts, with five years of university study in Fine Art, but in the world of magic as well. Growing up in Surrey, Jonathan first encountered stage magic at the age of seven. "The first trick I ever witnessed," he recalls, "was the sliding Die Box, performed at my school by none other than the current president of the Magic Circle, Alan Shaxon."

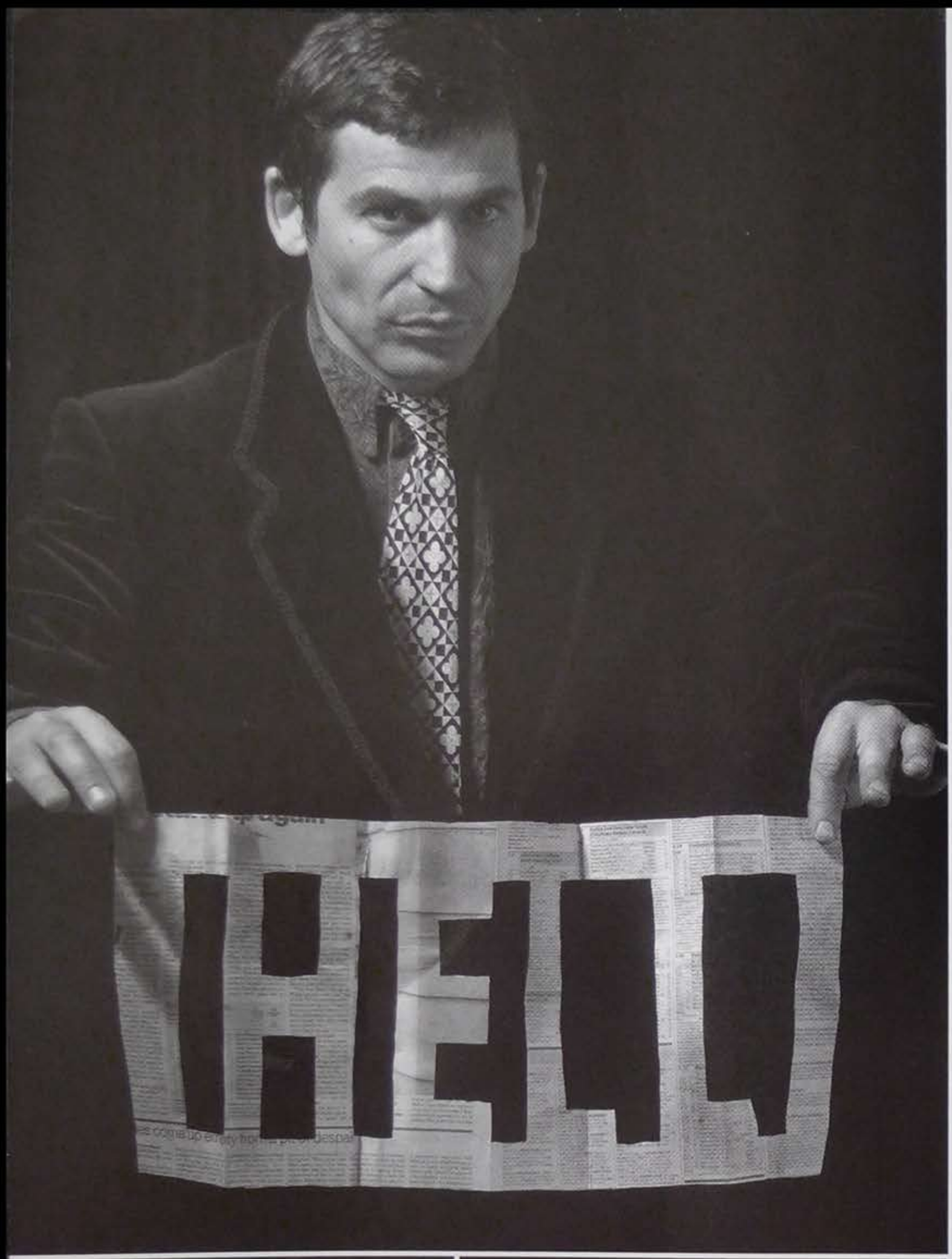
His other childhood influences were his two grandfathers. One of them had a hobby of making miniature fairground models, "glittering marvels which I helped paint and assemble in a workshop which was full of visual mischief." There, Jonathan came across double-headed coins, loaded dice, and a mirror with a semi-circular cut-out which Jonathan later discovered "had been an attempt to recreate The Spider & The Fly illusion as described in Hopkins' *Magic*, using my mother as the spider." Jonathan's other grandfather, a research metallurgist, later took up landscape painting. "When I came across his canvases and brushes in the family attic, a space which I was already using to devise trick routines, the contents of my conjuring box and his paint box got mixed up and have remained so, metaphorically, ever since."

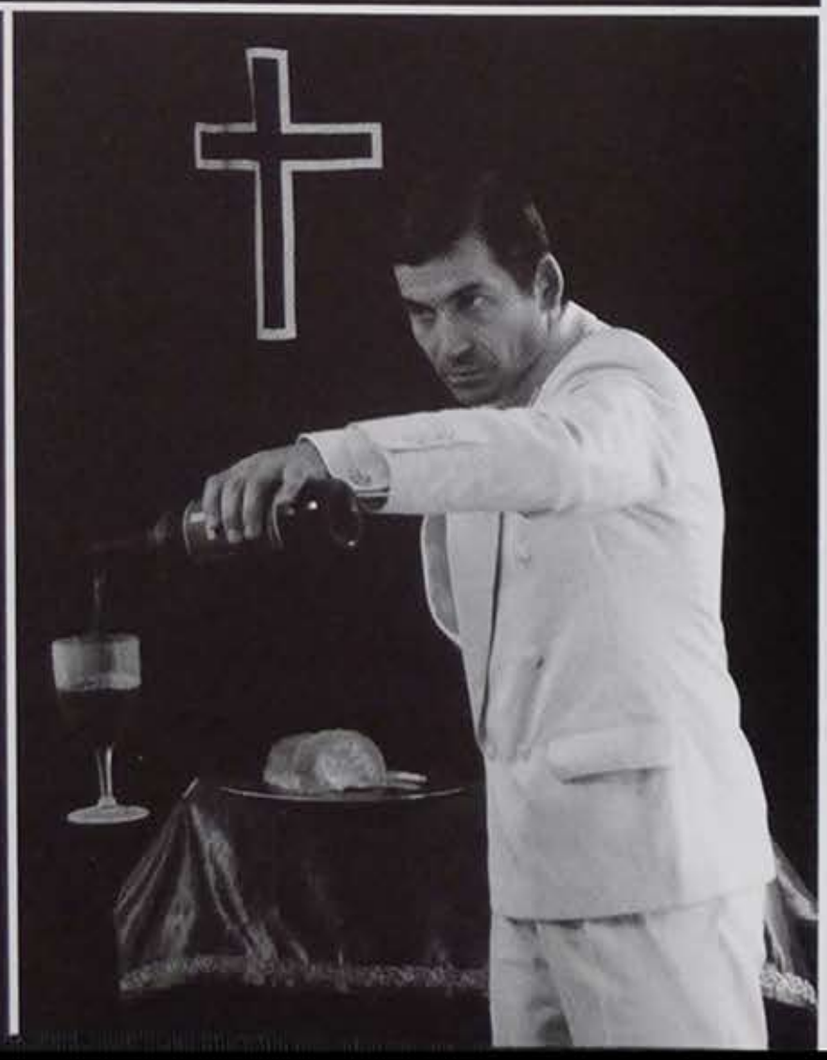
The dual interests took hold. Allen performed regularly in his teens, working birthday parties and other informal events. Without the presence of formal magic schools, his higher education became focused largely on "the study of the illusionism of painting." Since that time, his work as a visual artist has continued to explore the way in which illusion interweaves with everyday life, and shapes contemporary culture in often-unexpected ways.

A number of years ago, Allen turned his attention to religious belief. "I realized that gospel magic as we know it in the magic community had left untouched a vast reservoir of imagery," he says. "Theatrical magic performances, such as the beheading of the John the Baptist, were a part of the European medieval mystery plays well before gospel magic's father figure, Rev. Charles H. Woolston, began performing his "object lessons' to Pennsylvanian congregations in the early 1900s. Being familiar with both art history and magic history, I

Magic Magazine
Las Vegas Feb 2006







sensed that I could draw the two traditions together to develop a series of photographic images on the theme of belief. With conflicting religious fundamentalism reshaping global history, the theme seemed especially relevant."

His performance persona of "a gospel-magician-losing-his-faith" has grown into the Tommy Angel character of today. Allen calls it "a visual exploration of the affinity between the character of the evangelist and that of the magician, both of which have the capacity to hold an audience in a spell of enchantment through a careful manipulation of its systems of belief."

Although conceived photographically, Tommy Angel's first manifestation was in the form of a live performance Allen gave in 2002 as part of *A Night of Performance Magic* at a small theatre in Sheffield, England. Allen recalls, "This event was mainly directed towards a performance art audience and explored the way in which artists had drawn inspiration from, or referenced the traditions of, stage magic."

In that first show, Allen/Angel levitated a cross, presented D'lites as a stigmata routine, and pulled Jesus silks out of a church offering bag. His current ten-minute act opens with him arrogantly striding onstage, pounding a wooden cross into the palm of his hand like a hammer. After levitating it, he points the cross at a female plant in the audience, who is drawn onstage and "converted" into his assistant. Angel then shoots her with a Bang Gun, which unfurls a banner that reads "Faith." A remote-controlled statue of Jesus carrying a cross rolls across the stage on a small wheeled platform, a glass floats in the air beneath a bottle pouring communion wine, a bible bursts into flame, and Kevin James' severed hand illusion is presented as a holy relic.

Commenting on his Tommy Angel show, Jonathan Allen says, "The material is primarily satirical and gets a strong reaction from audiences who seem to have no trouble unraveling the Christian and magic content with what often feels from the stage like a kind of shocked empathy."

Allen does not perform regularly and certainly does not make his living as a gospel magician. Photography is the medium in which Angel primarily resides. The traditional relationship between performance and photography is documentary, with the photographer documenting whatever takes place on stage. Here the relationship is reversed, with Tommy Angel stepping out of the fictional world of Allen's photographs to perform live. Allen states, "Tommy Angel blurs the line between fact and fiction, with the viewer never quite sure of his authenticity. In our increasingly medi-

ated culture, the idea that this somewhat malevolent figure might be toying with our perceptions is an additionally suggestive theme within the artwork itself."

Allen uses the performances as a form of "live drawing," helping him to compose the still photographs in the same way a painter might make studies before committing paint to canvas. "On stage, I sometimes discover new choreographic gestures and imagery which I then selectively recreate before the camera," he says. Allen works closely with another British photographer, Mark Enstone, to complete the life-sized photographic tableaux.

There are routines depicted in the photographs that are not necessarily portrayed live onstage by Angel. Allen wants his viewers to pick up on "the associations between the rich iconography of both magic and Christian history." To that end, his photos have reinterpreted a dove act "in a way that reminds the viewer of the many scenes of Christ's baptism in Renaissance paintings, when the holy spirit descended in the form of a white dove." The traditional black-and-white magician's wand has become a cross, just one of many in a suitcase full of such items, including a rope-cross, a diminishing cross, and a cross with playing card pips at its ends. The Pharos black-art self-decapitation recollects the beheading of John the Baptist, and a paper-tearing routine — which in others' hands would read the word "Hello" — instead reads "Hell" for Angel.

Allen feels he was probably drawn to the theme of religious belief due to its strong presence in his childhood. "One of the first details of magic history that struck me was the theory, often quoted by historians, that the term 'hocus pocus' was derived from a lay mishearing of the Catholic priests words as he transubstantiates the host, saying in Latin 'hoc est corpus' ('this is His body'). Whether true or not, the seeds of the idea that conjuring and religious belief were somehow connected were planted. I delighted in stories of Catholic monks using wires and 'engines' to make statues blink and cry, in the same way that priests had used stage illusion technology to impress upon believers in earlier times."

Tommy Angel's creator/portrayer intends that his acts "put Christian history on a collision course with the history of magic, whilst at the same time suggesting a subtext about contemporary political culture. Allen hopes that such layered meanings are comprehensible both to viewers of the photographs and to audiences when he performs live. "My wider message as an artist, and indeed as a magician, is that the more subtle our expressivity becomes, the more chance we have of illuminating, and navigating through, the uncertain world which we seem to be creating for ourselves."

> I SENSED THAT THERE MIGHT BE SOMEONE LIKE TOMMY ANGEL OUT THERE, BUT I COULDN'T FIND HIM. SO I HAD TO BECOME HIM.

Allen was one of the moving spirits behind a major art exhibition held at the Site Gallery in Sheffield in 2002, entitled "Con Art." He describes the show as "an exploration of the way in which magicians and visual artists 'share an imagination.' We wanted to find out what both communities could learn from one another, both historically and in terms of contemporary practice." The show came about after Jonathan happened to sit next to American art curator Helen Varola at Monday Night Magic in New York in 1998. Jackie Flosso had encouraged Allen to attend after Allen photographed him in his Manhattan shop the day before. "Con Art" featured the work of other artists as well as Allen's own; essays were written for the catalogue by Eddie Dawes and Jeff Sheridan, among others.

The Tommy Angel photographs recently gained media attention while on display as part of the contemporary art exhibition "Variety" at the De La Warr Pavilion in the UK last year. Tommy/Jonathan will be seen in more exhibitions in London this month, as well as featuring in the first international Singapore Contemporary Art Biennale this fall.

Allen has remained involved in the magic world outside of his Angelic endeavors. A chance meeting with illusion designer Paul Kieve more than six years ago has resulted in several collaborations. In 2004 they worked together on Carnesky's GhostTrain, including a version of Pepper's Ghost which allowed a performer to dance live with dozens of white doves. The previous year, Allen assisted Kieve with his work for the film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Other collaborators include British magician Scott Penrose, with whom Allen performed onstage at the Magic Circle, as the head in Penrose's recreation of the Joseph Hartz presentation of The Sphinx. In 2005, he assisted Penrose again for *Dirty Tricks*, a "scurrilous" television series recently screened on Britain's Channel 4 television. As consultants, both Kieve and Penrose have contributed to Tommy Angel's arsenal of evangelical weaponry.

Jonathan Allen has made a serious study of the culture of gospel magic, more as an artist and sociologist than as an insider. "I do not share the beliefs or evangelistic ambitions of the community we know as gospel magicians," he says. "The images I make are a meditation on contemporary religious belief set against the political landscape of our time. I sensed that there might be someone like Tommy Angel out there, but I couldn't find him. So I had to become him."

The artist is committed to increasing magic's "suggestiveness," and to exploring how magic as an art form "ought perhaps recognize that it is profoundly resonant in a culture that is being increasingly shaped by illusions and fictions of many kinds.

"I have no problem whatsoever with magic being entertaining, and even light... it's just when it becomes *only* entertaining or *only* light that I feel it can become culturally trivial." ◆

Jonathan Allen's Tommy Angel photographs will be showing at David Risley Gallery, London, through February 19; Tommy Angel will perform at Tate Britain on February 3. Jonathan's work will be featured at the first Singapore Contemporary Art Biennale, an international exhibition with the theme of "Belief," running from September 4 through November 12, 2006.

JONATHAN ALLEN: KALANAG

DAVID RISLEY GALLERY, LONDON
23 NOVEMBER – 6 JANUARY

KALANAG (detail), 2007, plinth, mounted photographs. Photo: Dave Morgan. Courtesy the artist and David Risley Gallery, London

The artist Jonathan Allen is a member of the Magic Circle and, perhaps more importantly, a passionate researcher on the history and application of magic. This valuable insider knowledge on the practise of deception sets Allen apart from many artists who claim to be examining the merging of 'fiction' and 'reality', and in his project *KALANAG* he produces a brave, elegant and layered installation about the twentieth-century magician Helmut Schreiber.

Kalanag was Schreiber's stage name, and it was only when his unseemly association with the Nazi Party came to light towards the end of his career that the respect garnered for his magical accomplishments was replaced with indignation from peers and public. His association with the Third Reich ran deep, well beyond any notional apology for a latter-day court jester performing under duress for an unpredictable master; instead Kalanag appears to have achieved the chilling status of embedded ideologue intimately connected to the leading figures of Hitler's Germany, including the Führer himself. As well as regular performances for party members, Kalanag was president of the rampantly anti-Semitic German Magic Circle and was also responsible for producing more than a hundred propaganda films as the chief of the Bavaria Filmkunst in Munich. This is a whole lot more upsetting than finding out that your favourite ballerina supports the BNP.

On entering Allen's installation we are first confronted by a spot-it vitrine containing a jug sitting atop an old travelling case that bares the moniker 'Kalanag' in a severe angular stencilled font. One's first sense is to assume that these objects are reconstructions imagined by the artist, but no: these are the actual objects used by Schreiber, acquired by Allen at auction. On the other side of the same wall sits a selection of photographs of Schreiber as Kalanag that have been rephotographed by Allen from original documentary sources; we see him performing for, among others, Hitler and Göring, and we see the jug being used as a stage prop. The conceptual rigour of the work is completed by the knowledge that Allen used water from Kalanag's jug to develop his photographs – transforming images that feel familiarly museological into objects that begin to perform for themselves.

These subtly disturbing elements and knowledge of the subject's provenance combine to create a single work imbued with a dark intensity and aura. To a degree, Allen is playing games with systems of faith and is intent on testing our willingness as viewers to believe in the significance of an object's received memory. The process of rephotographing and the almost ritualistic production of the images suggest an engagement in a form of viral mythmaking that extends beyond the gallery walls and into the realm of imagined performance; which, like the magician, cleverly satisfies our need to know 'how it's done' without giving too much away.

Alasdair Hopwood

Art Review - Alastair Hopwood, Spring 2008

Altered images

Helen Sumpter goes on the trail of ectoplasmic emissions and Nazi magic in a quest to uncover photography's relationship to the unreal

Since its invention, photography has had the ability to manipulate as well as manifest our view of the world around us, never more so than in the realms of the unreal. Faked photos of flying saucers, Loch Ness monsters, hairy yetis and Edwardian fairies are as important to the medium's history as the capturing of a beautiful landscape. The Photographers' Gallery's 'Seeing is Believing' explores photography's relationship to the spooky and the supernatural, in work by seven contemporary artists and a suite of older images from the the Harry Price Library of Magical Literature.

Britain's best-known ghost investigator Price set up the National Laboratory of Psychical Research in 1925. He wanted to sort out the supernatural charlatans from the genuine psychics and photography played a vital role. In most of the images it's hard to believe how any of the supernatural manifestations – females with mouths full of rolled-up cheesecloth purporting to be ectoplasm and sheet-like spooks dangling from suspended coat hangers among them – could have convinced anyone. But as historical documents of the pipe-smoking doctor and his activities they're fascinating, not least in what the titles reveal: 'DC Russell, amateur firewalker, after having his burns dressed', almost says it all.

Despite the rich subject matter and creative potential of photography today, work by some of the contemporary artists seems slight by comparison. Surrounding her subjects with a fuzzy grey mist Clare Strand's large-scale black-and-white 'aura' portraits of young people emit a feeling of depressive emptiness rather than energy. Tim Maul's panel of 12 images highlighting hallways, doorways and windows in New York where psychic activity has been detected creates more of an atmosphere but is still too obvious an idea. More interesting and affecting is Susan MacWilliam's video 'Explaining Magic to Mercer'. On screen, the five-year-old boy Mercer is seen drawing at a table, while asking questions to the unseen artist about the special powers of subjects featured in her own artworks, including Mollie Fancher's multiple personalities and the fingertip vision of Rosa Kuleshova. The occult subject matter and the shadowy presence of the artist somehow gives Mercer an unsettling authority. The child's uncanny resemblance to Damien from 'The Omen' movie doesn't go unnoticed.

Above left: half of Ben Judd's stereoscopic 'Sequential Opposition', 2006. Above: Helen Duncan during séance, with head covered in ectoplasm, 1931. Left: Jonathan Allen, 'Kalanag', 2007

At David Risley's gallery, in Jonathan Allen's exhibition about the German magician Helmut Schreiber, it's not the supposedly psychic photographic imagery of hauntings that we're asked to believe, but the notion that photographs and other objects have their own power to haunt. Born in 1903, Schreiber (stage name Kalanag) was a German magician and president of the German Magic Circle in the lead up to World War II. From the late 1940s to the early '60s Kalanag toured the world with a successful magic and music spectacular. During the war however, Kalanag was closely associated with the upper echelons of the Nazi party including Goebbels, Göring and Hitler himself, details of which the showman was obviously keen to conceal, just as the magic community tried to disassociate itself from him. Allen's exploration of the subject considers not only the power of photographic imagery, but also the problematic power of association.

A wall of framed photos shows Kalanag in various publicity and performance shots from throughout his career; levitating a lady on stage, posing in cowboy hat and cigar or as the great white hunter with Simbo the performing cheetah (apparently a gift from Ethiopean Emperor Haile Selassie). In grainy archive footage, Kalanag is also seen performing for a seated Führer – for once not the main focus of attention – whose gaze, along with that of the audience around him, is directed towards the magician. It's a contentious image, not only among the magic community – still conflicted between the distaste for Kalanag's Nazi associations and acknowledgement of his achievements as a magician – but also for the obvious parallels between a magician's power to enchant and a charismatic political leader or dictator's ability to command and hold an audience. Accompanying the photographs Allen displays a vitrine containing a plain earthenware jar sat on its metal carrying case. The jar – a 'lota vase' – is an original Kalanag prop, used by the magician to provide a seemingly inexhaustible supply of water in his illusion 'Waters from India'. Allen has added another layer of association to the story by reprinting the photos in the show in water that has passed through Kalanag's vase – resulting in the images themselves being tainted by something that has touched their own past.

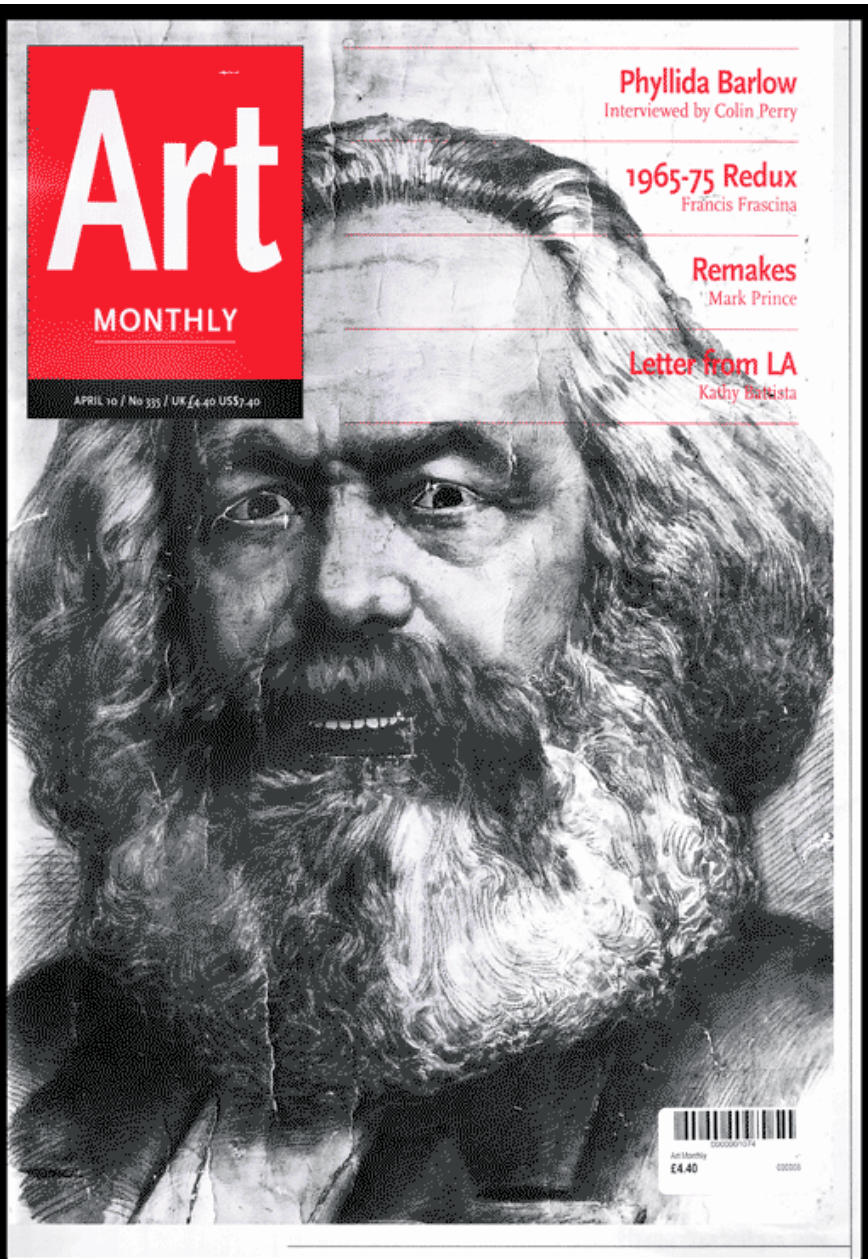
It's hard to believe how mouths full of cheesecloth and sheet-like spooks could have convinced anyone

As an exhibition this is a rather brusque display and it's a shame that the planned performance (the artist is himself a magician) couldn't be funded for this show. Then again, perhaps minimal is appropriate. Seeing may be believing, but as with all illusions it's not so much what's there, but about the power to suggest what might be there.

'Seeing is Believing' continues at the Photographers' Gallery until Jan 27. (See Photography). Jonathan Allen shows at David Risley until Jan 6 (See East End).

helensumpter@timeout.com

Time Out - Helen Sumpter, Dec 2007

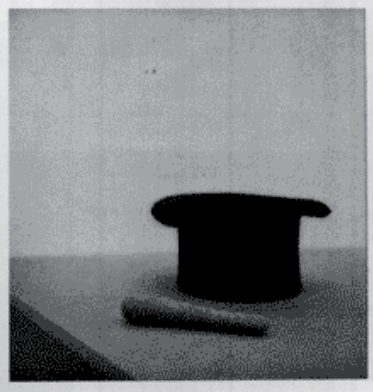


Magic Show

Grundy Art Gallery Blackpool 13 February to 10 April

In an episode extract from *Derren Brown's Trick or Treat*, viewable on video at the start of this 24-artist show, art critic Adrian Searle stands with a knife poised before one of three paper-wrapped canvases resting on easels. Ostensibly, he has a one-in-three chance of unknowingly slashing the characteristically

Colin Guillemet
Untitled (anything but a rabbit), 2006



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'Magic Show' - Martin Herbert April 2010

grotesque painting *Arachnokitty*, 2001, by 'Jackie & Denise Chapwoman', which is inside one of them; the artists, better known as Jake & Dinos Chapman, stand watching, smirking, though clearly not entirely sure what to expect. Searle slashes, then removes the paper: phew. He picks another, slashes: right (or wrong) again. Luck? Or had Derren Brown succeeded in a mentalist experiment on the estimable *Guardian* writer? In the end, it doesn't matter, since one can virtually hear the cogs whirring in the Chapmans' minds before they cajole him into knifing the one sealed canvas left. (The slashed *Arachnokitty*, retitled *When Art Critics Go Bad* and dated 2001/06, is on display in the next room.) But if art audiences feel sceptical of Brown's crowd-pleasing powers when compared with the elevated territories they themselves inhabit, it may be partly because there are more parallels between art and magic than we might comfortably admit.

As is intimated by 'Magic Show', co-curated by artist Jonathan Allen (a practising magician and member of The Magic Circle) and critic and curator Sally O'Reilly, both art and magic are concerned with manipulating perception, with the theatrics of suggestion and the leveraging of confidence. Do we really believe that an 11-inch spherical space above Tom Friedman's *Untitled (A Curse)*, 1992, contains a curse placed there by a witch? (Or that the same artist really stared at a piece of paper for a thousand hours?) We try to. The 'it is because I say it is' provocation dates back to Duchamp at least; the charged space of the gallery, which transfigures what it contains, might be analogous to the ritual and razzmatazz of conjuring.

Art, though, as in the Chapmans' wrecked canvas, could be expected to lean more towards puncture than perpetuation; showing the wires rather than making them invisible. Here, it often does. In Juan Muñoz's untitled photographs from 1995, we see tiny, cheat-permitting fingertip mirrors on a card-sharp's hands (though the artist was something of a conjuror of atmospheres himself); in Ariel Schlesinger's *Netally and I*, 2006, a pair of 'bent' pencils were presumably just made that way. In Colin Guillemet's *Untitled (anything but a rabbit)*, 2006 – the kind of thing Tommy Cooper might have made if he'd turned to conceptualism rather than comedy – paired Polaroids feature, in the left frame, a carrot beside an upturned top hat; and, in the right, the non-rabbit that has bathetically materialised: a parsnip, a fish, an umbrella. Bruce Nauman's *Failing to Levitate*, 1966, is a double-exposure photograph which features the artist at once balancing between two chairs and slumped below them; it's an image both unearthly and defeatedly materialist, played with a poker face. Susan Hiller's frieze of photographs featuring people 'levitating', *Homage to Yves Klein*, 2008, says more about technology than a mystical overcoming of gravity, as does Ansuman Biswas and Jem Finer's *Zero Genie*, 2001, a video of clownish behaviour on magic carpets, aided by an anti-gravity environment.

And yet we don't live in a fully rational, or at least scientifically comprehended, world: we live in one where, for example, the mind-over-matter rationale of placebos can cure the sick with sugar pills. As is underlined by Zoe Beloff's 3D video playing in a sculptural proscenium, *A Modern Case of Possession*, 2007 – which turns several episodes from the casebooks of early 20th-century psychopathologist Pierre Janet into colourful operetta – the mind gives up its secrets in a slow release from superstition, which looks bizarre in retrospect. Gone are the days when most right-thinking individuals believed in demonic possession, and the illusion of 3D isn't going to shock us anymore (*Avatar* notwithstanding), but those days aren't so long ago. Plus, there is a pleasure in being fooled, as everything from Derren Brown to this show's historical sidebars of props and posters reminds us. And yet sleight-of-hand infests everything from political spin doctoring to marketing. (Sometimes the linkage is made plain here, as in the tube of Clarks' Shumagic Renovating Polish, nestling in a trans-historical display of magic-related goods, which features a picture of magician Robert Harbin on its packaging.) A selection of archive posters, meanwhile – for 'The Man Who Has Tamed Electricity', or 'The Great Sorcar, World's Greatest Magician' etc – reminds us that 'twas ever thus, and that today's sorcerers will be tomorrow's nostalgic punchlines.

Allen makes one of the show's larger associative leaps when he presents, in *Kalanag Double*, 2009, a pair of photographs of the masks which Nazi magician Helmut Schreiber, who performed for Hitler himself, used to create an illusion of doppelgangers before live audiences. They are rough-looking things – one assumes they were seen briefly, in shady environments – and they emphatically correlate magic with dangerous levels of deception and shared hypnosis. (A particularly bold move in Blackpool, this.) But perhaps the show's most salient strike comes via Sinta Werner's site-specific installation, which takes features of the Grundy's handsome Edwardian architecture – the columns, the walls – and smashes together fragmented copies of them along with some vertical strips of glass. At first it looks like cubistic chaos, but there's a point where one can stand in which the architecture seems correct, but as if reflected in a pair of sloping mirrors – mirrors in which a viewer doesn't feature, because they aren't really there. When we angle ourselves and squint and laboriously reposition ourselves to make the illusion real, we're demonstrating what every magician (and not a few artists) pins their act on: the fact that, against the banality of the everyday, we actively want to believe in the magical, because the lie is more exciting than the truth. ▮

Magic Show tours to Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle, 15 May to 4 July, Chapter, Cardiff, 30 July to 12 September and Pump House Gallery, London, 6 October to 19 December.

MARTIN HERBERT is a writer based in Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

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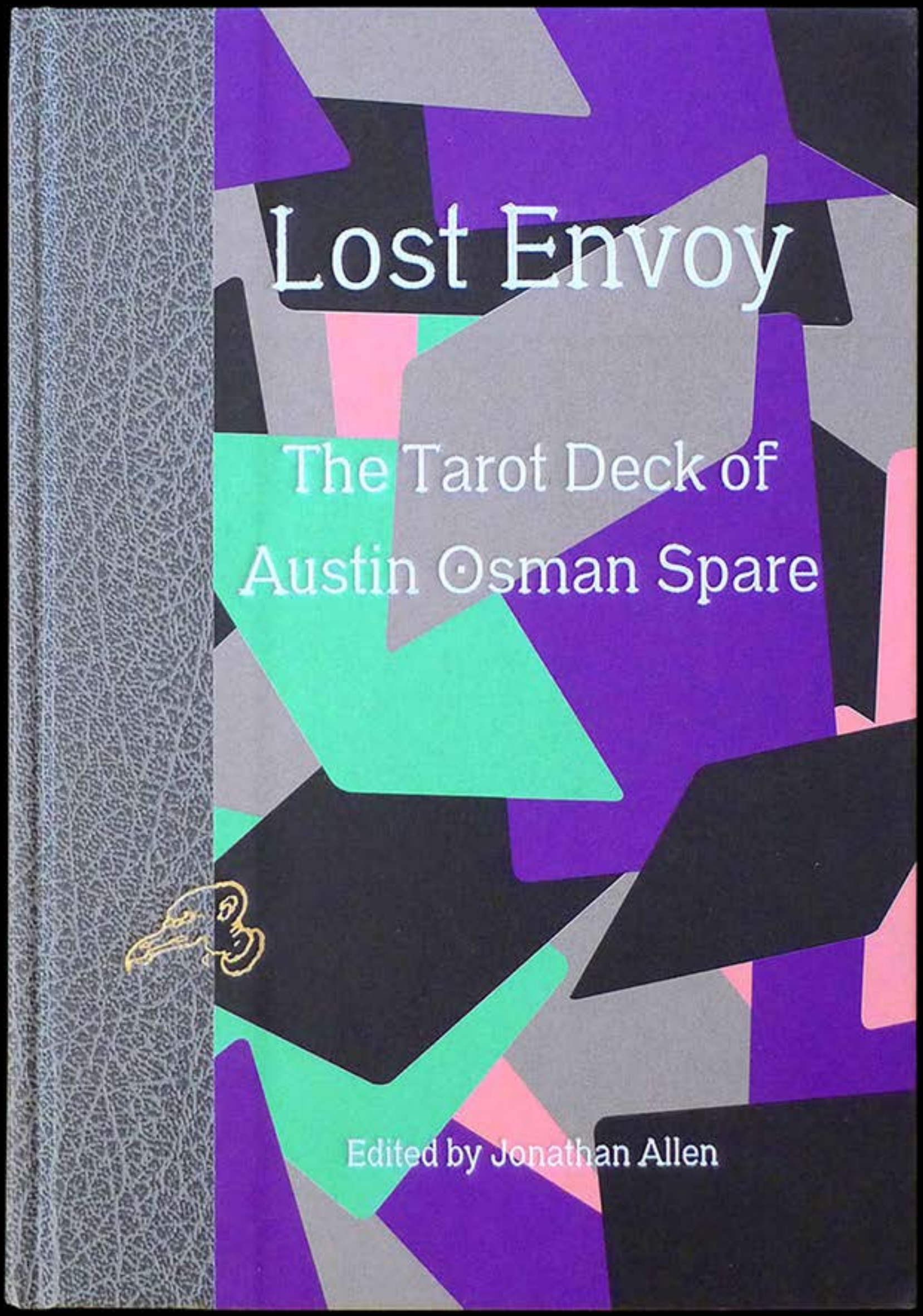
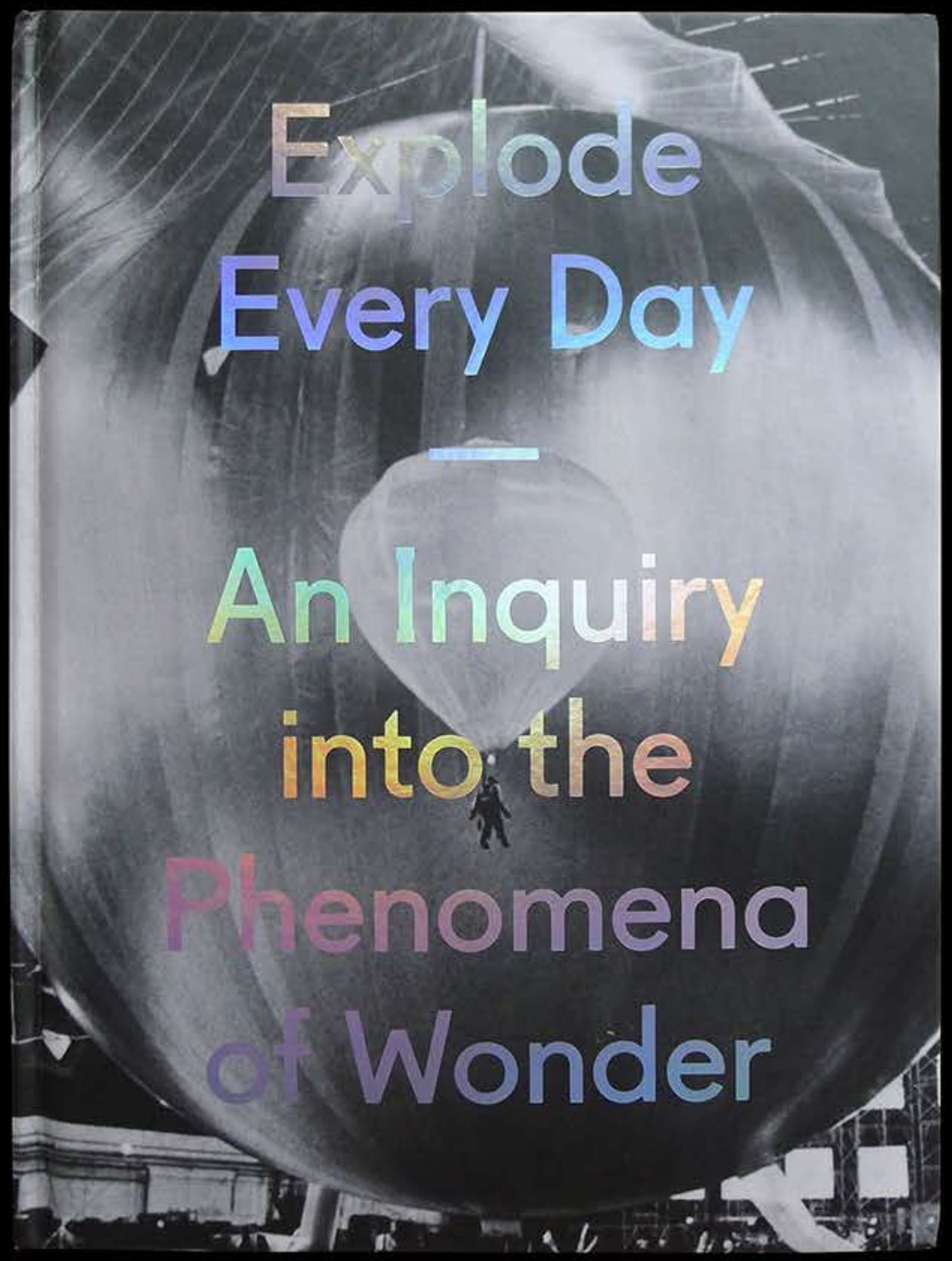


"The fantastic new book on the tarot deck of Austin Osman Spare from Strange Attractor Press and edited by Jonathan Allen"

Frieze Magazine, 2016



‘Unknown Unknowns’
Denise Markonish,
Explode Every Day
MASS MoCA, 2016-17

Jonathan Allen’s work is rooted in the uncertainties of wonder, illusion, bewilderment, politics, and religion. Allen is a master illusionist and is careful to point out that magic has a complicated reception in the world, writing: “The construction of the conditions of wonderment can, however, be undertaken for both benign and nefarious ends. Herein lies another clue to our fascination: our concern over the distinction between temporary illusion (from illudare, to play) and permanent deception (from decipere, to ensnare or trap).”[67] Allen’s use of the term “fascination” is key to this notion of uncertain wonder and bewilderment, and the drive to place ourselves into the path of the unknown. From 2004 to 2006, Allen performed under the alter ego Tommy Angel, a gospel magician whose illusions played with the theatricalization of power. Aligning the magician with the evangelical preacher or campaigning politician, Allen shows us perceived miracles through his own sleight of hand. Dressed in a slick suit, he enchants his audience—rather than a wand, Angel has a cross; he makes the Bible burn before our eyes, and conjures magicians’ silks bearing the image of Christ or proclaiming “Faith.” Tommy Angel’s polish makes his motives even more uncertain, exemplifying that through the politicization of magic, wonder becomes more unknowable, and also more enchanting. Allen’s most recent work, Twenty-First-Century Silks (2016), begins with the long history of the empty-handed magician suddenly pulling flag after flag from his body. These flags were often nationalistic, making the magician’s body the center of “the spontaneous production and choreography of diversified nationhood, all accompanied from the orchestra pit with appropriate patriotic anthems.”[68] Preacher, politician, magician ... it gets harder to draw lines between the three. Of particular interest to Allen is the British performer Kardoma, who during World War II would “fill the stage with flags.” This celebration of nationhood was highly political and part of the United Kingdom’s WWII propaganda campaigns. At the end of the war, Kardoma, no longer wanting to play into nationalism, began filling his stage with flowers (made of feathers), perhaps the most political of his moves. Allen uses this concept to create a two-channel video. In the work, two screens abut one another in the corner, and from the inky black background Allen’s hands appear and he unfurls a series of silks: War, Glory, and God, etc. Rather than erasing the fact that we seem to be in a continual state of war (heavily based in religion), Allen allows us to confront the illusions of politicians and preachers, and to instead believe the magician, who, by creating juxtapositions between faith and politics, is really telling us the truth. Flowers cannot erase the atrocities of war, a true example of uncertain wonder.

TOMMY ANGEL

Jonathan Allen, *Tommy Angel #1C*, 2007

Twenty-First-Century Silks
two-channel video, 2016

for *Explode Every Day*
MASS MoCA 2016-17