

## When Art Bears the Cross Outside the Gallery

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As a symbol in art, the cross is a common feature in the paintings and sculptures that make up our national collections - a static, iconic representation with all the codification and gravitas bestowed by the authority of the fine art world. This century so far has, however, increasingly seen the cross drawn out of its institutionalization as a symbol in the history of art, and drawn into dynamic, public engagement both in the arts and the political arena: I shall go on to look at some examples in the main part of this paper.

But first, some scene-setting. If I'm to talk about art outside the gallery, I'll be bringing certain assumptions about what I think it is doing there. I'm not, in this case, talking about art as a level playing field where differing types (such as theatre production or book illustration) sit mutually exclusively in their own sociological space, alongside gallery artwork. I agree with Elkins (in his book *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*) that fine art or high art has a claim to authoritative influence on the basis of historical importance, uniqueness and relevance – this influence being fostered by the institutions of gallery and academia.<sup>1</sup> I say fostered by, but the point I want to make is that it is *not limited to* these institutions.

If it's true that fine art does generally have blind spots when contemplating the spiritual, then it may be because the thread of authoritative influence is, as often before, being found today in places that the traditional institutions of art authority have rejected. The case I present, and my position in this extra-gallery landscape, is one where I want to point to aspects of iconography and faith that can be understood as important contemporary fine art concerns, and can be theorized, digested and taken seriously as such.

On what levels then, does the cross operate as a particular locus for these concerns? The short answer is on many levels, and it takes some unravelling to discern their significance and subtleties in our culture. There is the immediate and unavoidable reference, in the use of such a symbol, to Christianity's pivotal, historical and doctrinal cornerstone, whose loadedness seems to be wielded either more or less knowingly by artists as religious comment. It would be easy to focus on the extremes. On the one hand, traditional altarpieces such as those by Cimabue and Grünewald, whose language is commonly understood in the modernist terms of art history's labels, lend (and justify) to some artists the sincere and straightforward functional use of the cross as part of a continuing heritage of art put to service for faith. On the other hand, the postmodern legitimacy of criticism, irony and shock-value in art lends (and justifies) to other artists the wry or scandalous use of the cross as part of a move to put faith (or the qualities it stands for) to service for art – I'm thinking of Serrano or Gilbert & George. It may be observed that there is more of the sincere type outside the gallery, and more of the ironic type within it.

But what happens when an artist attempts to acknowledge both positions, and move forward from within them? A participant in Anthony Gormley's *One and Other* project, Luke Walton (Arts Development Officer, Bible Society) brought the cross onto the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square in October 2009. Here was an appearance that saw a confluence of art in the service of faith and faith in the service of art, in what was both a literal and virtual public square. For an hour, Walton engaged visitors and online watchers in an interactive performance, whereby he erected a simple wooden cross on which he nailed banners written with the viewers' questions. Using phone, text, internet, email, TV and face-to-face contact, questions posed included 'Can I wear this to work?' 'Why don't people just believe?' and '6 days or 4 billions years?' (**Figure 1 below**)

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<sup>1</sup> James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, Routledge, 2004, p.3.



Rather than a disintegration of that symbolic intensity which we inherit from Christian art tradition, this diverse, loosely-constructed engagement is a site of creation more in keeping with the nature of faith itself. The symbol of the cross is enlivened by the questions that surround its meaning for different people, it is more deeply embedded in our (and Jesus') humanity and less an imposition of God's divinity. Walton himself has said that Mark Wallinger's *Ecce Homo*, which graced the plinth in 2000, was a direct inspiration in its diminutive size and placement for bringing questions about faith back down to earth.

Such is the complex history of representations of the cross in both fine art and the church that a direct human levelling of any issue in their respective institutions is quite difficult to achieve, and perhaps this is precisely why Gormley's project has succeeded for Walton – it is removed from both the white-walled art gallery and the aloof pulpit, becoming less insular and less hierarchical. For the plinth hosted hourly slots for 2,400 people over 3 months, each drawn by lottery, and in that time saw diverse performances from aerobics instructors, charity campaigners, musicians, story-tellers, and those simply sitting still. It can be seen in its entirety, according to Gormley, as a 'classical anthropology exercise'<sup>2</sup>, less X-Factor-style individual exhibitionism than distillation of relationship – what you would communicate to the world if you had an hour of its time.

This interactivity in Walton's work bears out that dynamic aspect of faith which would not label 'religious' art with doctrinal strongholds, exclusive to those who've signed up to them. It calls to mind something of the place held by enlivened action that used to be part and parcel of medieval Christian worship – for example the Passion Play - giving a particularly democratic resonance to the cross as a community hinge. Here, with invitation, with questions, and with a global audience, artwork and faith are released into being relational, specific, creaturely, and meaningful. Another plinther, the Revd Ken Chalmers (who conducted a service during his slot) commented that his was a demonstration of a 'church without walls', showing hospitality and welcome.<sup>3</sup>

In the year when *The Sacred Made Real* exhibition came to the adjacent National Gallery, *One and Other* celebrated a humanity made real. And within it (through Walton and others who touched on this subject), realised a British interpretation of the sacred. It may not be contained in artefacts of more

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Gormley, interview on [www.oneandother.co.uk](http://www.oneandother.co.uk), Oct 2009.

<sup>3</sup> "When the plinth became a pulpit," Ed Beavan, *Church Times*, Issue 7649, 09/10/09.

conventional sculpture, where representation of the cross bears the weight of a more- or less-than-traditional iconography, but it is found in the baring of a cross which, stripped of pronouncements and image-consciousness, makes it more representative of both a faith open to individual expression and the human doubt that fills the spaces with questions. This openness is perhaps the main antidote to the kind of closure felt by many to accompany any expression of faith in art, especially when using symbolic language, and it is something I tried to incorporate in some of my previous work on representations of the cross. (Figure 2 below)



In 2006 I produced a series of 12 Stations of the Cross for Bristol Cathedral, with the aim of opening up possibilities for meditation and narrative both for the visitor to the Cathedral and to play a part in the Easter services and their congregations. The effect of a traditionally programmatic content in the stations and a traditionally programmatic context in the church building is one that already creates a set of institutional 'rules' such as would seem to eliminate the place for expression of faith as I have just described in Luke Walton's performance. The former necessarily binds up the weight and history of iconographical analysis with didactic code and the latter accords instruction on the appropriateness of action and reaction in relationship.

However, I venture to suggest that it need not be so discrete and closed. In my stations, I am trying to re-form what is both a knowledge-based understanding of subject-matter (the biblical account of the Passion), and a sensory engagement with design in terms of spiritual journey or encounter. In this particular balance there are new possibilities for a relationship between art and the church that recognizes the legacy of tradition in both content and context – but encourages a more contemporary, human telling of the Christian story, and goes some way towards breaking down the institutionalization that encroaches upon it.

This 'human telling' I specifically conceived of as multi-dimensional: a story has visual qualities that do not remain captive to, or do not always revert to, obvious iconographic or even literal interpretation. Metaphors, prose, symbolic meaning all provide meditative stopping points, and moving from written word (in this case, the Bible) to image is simply a media transition *within* linguistic openness. My cross in Station 10 *Jesus is Lifted Up* (Figure 3 overleaf) not only bears reference to specific symbolic overspill – by suggesting the typology of the Old Testament's snake-on-a-pole – but also suggests a layering of looking, where a relational encounter with the object of faith is divested of singularity or linearity and becomes instead about both seeing and being seen. This is further expanded on in the context of the whole series, where it is in the setting of a walk around the side-aisles of the cathedral that I wanted to emphasize the viewer's participation in the story, identifying localized scales of time and place with the experience of looking.



John Drury, in his book *Painting the Word*, has talked about 'mutual regard' being a fundamental characteristic of images which depict Bible passages because Christianity itself is about exchange.<sup>4</sup> And this is the point at which I think a symbol such as the cross can be re-interpreted as a dynamic and engaging faith-carrier in twenty-first century art. Many contemporary image theorists from Jean Baudrillard to Clive Scott have much to offer our understanding of signs as divergent (as opposed to convergent) communication. It is in the slippage of association and the multi-faceted reflection and absorption of concepts that symbols come alive, bearing out meaningfulness in non-dogmatic ways – and while this may be a frustration of the tools and framework of art criticism's analysis, it beautifully encapsulates the nature of faith itself. That is, it keeps it undefined, while also acknowledging the communicative power it undoubtedly bears.

Within the context of my series, I attempted to do this by presenting a people-oriented story, one where scenes are multi-layered, with many character interplays, emotional and spiritual exchanges, political and biblical symbols. Figures are drawn by way of sketched and photographed collage (which could, for example, be combinations of football crowds and Rembrandt faces), in order to effect a kind of dissolution of solidity, or at least a breaking-up of iconic heaviness. In the wider frame of my work using digital photography, I am interested in thwarting the one-eyed camera perspective which would make an ordered window of the world, exploring how the simultaneous presentation of multiple viewpoints can undo it – an 'undoing' which exposes something of the objective fallacy we assume in our looking at photographic material.

David Hockney, in his work with photographs, has called this 'undoing' an explicitly theological issue.<sup>5</sup> The question of distance which we feel visually in looking at two-dimensional linear-perspective depictions of space, is also felt spiritually; in the sense that what we assume to be a quantifiable and separate 'over there' in representation becomes a quantifiable and separate 'other' in terms of what it means. For the purposes of this paper, this is where we meet the question of levels of realism in representations of the cross. At what point or points in the relationship between viewer and artwork does a cross remain 'other' in its too-specific a reference to a historical event and how does this bear on the expression of faith?

It is worth pointing out the obvious difference between crucifix and cross, where the body of Christ is either present or not - this is the basis for much theological opinion on what precisely the message of

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<sup>4</sup> John Drury, *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and Their Meanings*, Yale University Press, 2002, p.36.

<sup>5</sup> David Hockney, *Hockney on 'Art': Conversations with Paul Joyce*, Little Brown, 2002, p.104.

Christianity consists of. There is also the question of appropriate bodies – whether Christ’s nakedness or suffering evokes too real an association of the visceral with the transcendent, or the human with the divine. In 2009, a church in West Sussex removed a particular sculpture from its façade on the grounds that they ‘felt the crucifix expressed despair and hopelessness and was not faithful to the biblical reality and doctrine of the Bible, which is that the cross is a place of great hope.’<sup>6</sup> (Figure 4 below)



Without going into the detail of this issue, it serves as an example to highlight the persistent and intractable equation of representation with actuality – the vicar said in effect, that by being too real, the crucifix wasn’t portraying the reality. It’s a view which simultaneously upholds the much-analysed association of belief with images (whose origins in ritualistic art reveal a specifically religious way of looking at them), and yet denounces it as being unbelievable for not bearing the truth. And if we extrapolate further that media which operates within the bounds of representation cannot show the unrepresentable, then how are we to contemplate the spiritual in art at all? I would argue that a sideways move into an analysis of the psychological and perceptual ways in which we apprehend things, coupled with the specific grappling of religious faith – for example, Christian theological notions of the ‘foolishness’ of the cross (ie. it isn’t what it looks like) - are ways of opening up the discussion for further debate.

In my work, I have started on this path with my recently-produced piece *See, I am Making All Things New* (Figure 5 overleaf). This was an attempt to complete the twelve stations I’d made earlier with a thirteenth that employed the cross as fully representational of the resurrection hope which the Sussex vicar talked about. While I was unconvinced that this could be done within the thread of the figure-heavy, narrative-type illustrations of the previous work, I also felt that the same ingredients of symbolic overflow and re-oriented ways of looking could express the same nature of a relational and transcendent faith. So what you are looking at is something that refers to New Testament descriptions of heaven as a multi-faceted jewel, and also on a bigger scale, an unfolded origami-like map of the world, where aerial photographs of different landscapes and cityscapes surround the cross-shape.

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<sup>6</sup> Revd. Dr Ewen Souter quoted in “Vicar takes down ‘scary’ crucifix”, Ed Beavan, *Church Times*, Issue 7608, 09/01/09.



This piece was commissioned by Trinity College in Bristol, which currently trains men and women for Christian ministry. Its installation in the chapel was occasion for a week's focus, in both worship and lectures, on eco-theology – wherein a consideration of the cross in my work necessarily departed from the tangibility of literal representation and became instead a launchpad into discussion about our relation to place both spatially and in time. It was my intention to highlight the possibility of re-enchanted landscape, one in which the (photographic) visual experience of distance is overcome by immersion and connection to that which the cross is shown holding together, namely a design for renewal and recreation.

In this way I hope to show again that dynamic aspect of faith which would not equate 'religious' art with doctrinal strongholds and iconographic labels. Rather, with invitation, with dialogue, and with an emphasis on the multi-layered nature of perception and belief, artworks can themselves be released into being relational, specific, meaningful and even sacred. There are ultimately more interesting levels to the spiritual in art than those of the sensational and the irrelevant – in the UK there are integrated cathedral residencies, there is church-led research into the commissioning process, there are crowd-pulling Christian-themed exhibitions, and a whole host of organisational websites dedicated to faith and the arts. This conference is also a welcome occasion to analyse a more complex spectrum of reaction and involvement when considering the contexts for creation and display of specific examples. I hope that my thoughts about the cross in this paper have fruitfully added to the discussions.

**Figure 1:** Luke Walton on the Fourth Plinth during Anthony Gormley's One and Other Project, Oct 2009.

**Figure 2:** *Stations 1 – 4*, inkjet prints on backlit film, Bristol Cathedral, April 2006.

**Figure 3:** *Station 10: Jesus is Lifted Up*, inkjet print on backlit film, 1.8 x 1.2m, 2006.

**Figure 4:** Edward Bainbridge Copnall's *Crucifix* being removed from St John's Horsham, Jan 2009.

**Figure 5:** *See, I am Making All Things New*, inkjet print on paper, 1.5 x 2.4m, 2010.