

'Co-operative Society.'

Exhibition dates: 8 July – 3 September

Preview: Thursday 7 July 6:00 – 8:00pm

Matt O'dell

"Nobody who has paid any attention to the peculiar features of our present era will doubt for a moment that we are living at a period of most wonderful transition... The distances which separated the different nations and parts of the globe are rapidly vanishing before the achievements of modern invention, and we can traverse with incredible ease; thought is communicated with the rapidity, and even by the power, of lightning..." Prince Albert, 1851 World's Fair

Matt O'dell's sculptures and installations explore 'micro-societies' and groups who, often tired with orthodox ideas, have attempted to forge their own belief systems. For the last five years, O'dell has developed works which primarily take the form of architectural models often accompanied by audio. The artist's use of model-making is a means to many ends. Firstly, it enables him to explore the flow of information and new concepts around the modern world. How, he asks, has the nature of belief changed in a media-saturated world? Secondly, it enables him to examine the relationship between fact and fiction in the news and in art. As events are only known through their representation, are they inevitably myths? Whilst O'dell's practice encompasses a spectrum of concerns, his works can be grouped under three related themes: disasters, cults, and conspiracy theories.

For 'Co-operative Society', O'dell presents works relating to the cults and conspiracies. These subjects enable him to examine how new ideas and beliefs emerge and are fostered – and their consequences. The works 'New Yorker / Church of Unification', and 'The Church of Scientology Celebrity Centre International, Hollywood', both look at the ethics and power of unorthodox religious groups. Through representations of their architecture, we arrive at an idea of the what combined will and wealth can create. O'dell recreates the real estate which the cults own to further their causes: the 'New Yorker' hotel, a twenty-storey tower, looms over us. Our first observation of the work is that O'dell's model is neither an exact replica, as detailing is absent, nor a simple generic representation of Manhattan architecture. Rather, we feel to be caught somewhat uncomfortably between the two. Accordingly, it becomes impossible to simply read the work as a commentary about the forms which institutional power takes through architecture. Being forced to look closely, we notice each model's characteristics actually contradict the associations we expect. If we initially see 'New Yorker' in terms of the astonishing volume of capital it

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embodies, this soon grinds to a halt. We quickly shift to seeing it as both a comic and threatening play of category errors. Sat on a plinth, the 'New Yorker' is too large for an ordinary model. At over seven foot tall, it is at once punily small compared to its actual counterpart yet overgrown for a gallery setting.

As O'dell remarks, several of his works play with us by generating "a sense of implied threat", which is amplified by accompanying audio tracks ordinarily heard on headphones. When viewing architectural representations, we feel to be at a safe distance to the ideologies of the cults. As the artist notes, "through the reduction in scale, and a loss of information, these worlds become unreachable... there is a removal from the real." The artist uses sound, however, to return us violently to 'the real'. In 'New Yorker', the audio track is a loop of the actual hymns played within the building. Listening in, we become placed, imaginatively, in the position of one of the cult members – with some discomfort. Even though the songs are distinctly kitsch, we feel subjected to what the artist calls their "brainwashing". The music's interminable repetition reminds us of the members' confidence in the coherence of their belief system. In turn, we begin to wonder whether our own ideas might be more contingent or contradictory than we imagine. Are such 'microsocieties' models of the wider body politic, or anomalies within them?

O'dell's working process is entirely particular to our time. He is one of the first generations of artists to make full use of the resources that the internet provides in order to think about its' effect on our imagination. The internet is both the artist's source for subjects and his research tool. It provides access to detailed maps and diagrams which he uses to construct models, for example. For most of us, the media are the primary means we have of knowing a wider world beyond our localised existence. The internet brings the entire world – or rather, stories about the entire world – into our living rooms. It offers new narratives and marginalized voices a way to be broadcast globally. As the artist notes, "my work is produced within a media dominant world. One uniting factor in all my practice is an interest in the journey that 'events' take, from an initial happening to appearing in front of us via media channels. Several works strive to mimic the lack of understanding we have of subjects when they reach us via the media."

In the work illustrated, 'Heaven's Gate Cult, Rancho Santa Fe, California, 1997', the artist's concerns with conspiracy theories and cults

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overlap. The 'Heaven's Gate' group committed suicide en masse, after the failure of the Halley-Bopp comet to transport them to paradise. (The cult believed the comet was an intergalactic 'spaceship' sent to collect them from earth). O'dell's interest in such groups stems from how apparently improbable beliefs attain a currency – and indeed become a matter of life and death for hundreds or thousands of individuals. But are we so exempt from persuasion?