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## Lydia Goldblatt

*Text:*

### And the Word Was God Catherine Grant Essay Pavilion Commission Exhibition Catalogue

In describing performative speech acts, JL Austin emphasises the need for the setting to be 'appropriate'. So, for a marriage ceremony to be valid, the statement "I will" has to take place in a church, registry office, or other legally recognised venue, in front of the correct official. Austin also explores how performative speech acts are often accompanied by actions, which create the ritual space in which saying becomes doing.

Since the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990, performativity has been most closely associated with the construction of gendered identity through a process of cultural reiteration that creates an illusion of a stable self. Through Butler, the notion of appropriate setting for performative utterances and actions has been refocused on investigations of performances of gender that reveal their performative basis, destroying the illusion of naturalised identity, from the campy excesses of the drag queen to the awkward inhabiting of adult poses and gestures by adolescents. In Lydia Goldblatt's series *And the Word Was God*, the tension between the performative and performance is explored in the observance of religious rituals and texts by a group of children and young adolescents. Approaching the construction of religious identity in a similar manner to recent explorations of gendered identity, Goldblatt focuses on the way in which religion is often learnt and internalised through ritualised activity and speech, taught to children from a young age. Her models are aged between eight and 14, traversing the period in which children are asked to claim their religion as adults, with ceremonies such as confirmation or the bar and bah mitzvah. Photographed and filmed in the theatre of a North London school, Goldblatt's models are drawn from various religious backgrounds, with their performances for the camera ranging from humorous acquiescence to absorbed contemplation to tense concentration.

The setting of a school theatre emphasises the communal aspect of these performances, recalling the carefully learnt words spoken in a school assembly, or the nervous fumbling through a church service. By joining in with a communal prayer or ritual, children are trained to observe the form of religious practice before necessarily understanding the function. In staging these events for the camera, Goldblatt explains how she wanted to explore the relationship between the individual and the community in the taking on of a religious identity, posing the question "Does the language of God leave room for individuality, for thought and perhaps doubt?"

This question is answered by the oscillation in Goldblatt's images between the presentation of the children as icons of religious ritual and the moments of uncertainty that punctuate the actions and words when remembered incorrectly. These pauses and inconsistencies contrast with the majority of images of children with a religious theme, with Victorian paintings such as Ford Maddox Ford's *Suffer the Little Children* providing a kitschy template that can still be seen today. In photography, the depiction of religious rituals is normally found in documentary practices, with the Christian overtones of the grand *Family of Man* project by Edward Steichen in the 1950s representing the most cloying version, in which children of all nationalities and religions are presented as uncomplicated, innocent beacons of light within a troubled world. This aestheticisation of youth as symbolic of hope and innocence is courted by the glossy prints and cute prettiness of Goldblatt's models. However, this aestheticisation emphasises the theatricality of these representations, underlining the distance from a documentary tradition that pretends to depict an unmanipulated reality.

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Goldblatt's influences for this series come not from Victorian painting or documentary photography, but from the portraits of artists such as Rembrandt and Carravagio, in which physical representation is paired with allegorical significance, referenced through the use of severe black backgrounds and heavy chiaroscuro. Like many contemporary photographers, Goldblatt plays with the contrast between painted and photographed portraits, so that her models are pictured as individuals, performing idiosyncratically for the camera, and as religious icons: from the numerous images of hands held together in prayer, to the mixing of cultural symbolism, so that a prayer shawl is rhymed visually with a turban cloth, and gestures of praise blend together. A recurring motif in both the photographs and video is the focus on internal states, so that hands obscure faces, eyes are closed in contemplation and close-ups take the viewer into the personal space of the models. Like the contemporary artist Wendy McMurdo, who uses digital manipulation in her photographs of child actors and musicians, Goldblatt poses the question of photography's relationship to experience, as what is seen does not necessarily tell the viewer what is felt. Seen alongside the more playful, staged shots in the series, the images which apparently depict spiritual reverie have to be re-read, so that what is revealed is the cultural accumulation of gestures and phrases rather than an individual sense of religion.

Unlike the hysterical quality of Bill Viola's series *The Passion*, in which spiritual emotion is translated into slow-motion virtuoso acting, Goldblatt's child models hold the viewer through the gaps and imperfections of their performances. The experience of performing for the camera is emphasised, particularly in the video, evoking the public rituals from which many of these scenes are drawn. Whether this is a prayer said with a congregation, a reading of a religious passage at school, or a intensively studied and practiced ceremony of commitment, these public confirmations of religious identity are not just about a personal sense of spirituality, but are used to create a common set of values within a community. Goldblatt focuses on the everyday aspect of the gestures, costumes and prayers that her models have been taught to inhabit before their implications are understood, asking how these rituals shape our sense of cultural identity, regardless of their impact on individual ideas of spirituality. The title of the project, "*And the Word Was God*", emphasises the performative language at the heart of religion, as well as the repetitive nature of religious rituals that can obscure the significance of what is being said or done.

Leaving aside questions of religion as beneficial or harmful to a child's sense of self and the wider community, Goldblatt's photographs ask the viewer to see and hear anew the habitual assumption of religious rituals. Watching a young girl recite the Lord's Prayer, I realise that I can still remember my own recitations as a child, a familiar experience of words tumbling forth, a magical incantation that was no more than vaguely understood. It is here that the tension between the performative and performance comes to the fore, with rote learning blending imperceptibly with considered religious sentiment so that the 'appropriate setting' is defined only by the performer's conviction. On the dark stage of a school theatre, Goldblatt presents scenes that combine the theatricality of religious spaces with the imagined space of her child models' experiences and personal interpretations, exploring the impossibility of visually relating a personal religious experience except

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through conventionalised symbols that can easily be no more than unfelt performance, whilst referencing a history of images and rituals that have tried to do just that.