

The badger on my head? It helps me fight youth crime

Why did a British artist meet an Israeli mayor wearing a stuffed animal?

Sarah Lightman



Animal magic: Marcus Coates watched by Mayor Moti Sasson and Galit Eilat

What connects contemporary British artist Marcus Coates and the mayor of the Israeli city of Holon? The answer can be found in an extraordinary short film currently being shown at Tate Britain in London.

Through his work, Coates seeks solutions to challenging scenarios facing local communities — a previous project included focusing on the residents of a Liverpool housing estate whose homes were due to be demolished.

He was invited to Israel by Galit Eilat, curator of The Israeli Centre for Digital Art in Holon, who set up the meeting with the city's mayor, Moti Sasson, as part of the Hapzura Arts Festival in 2007.

"The idea was to bring Marcus to Israel and to introduce his work to an Israeli audience," she says.

"Marcus asked to be in contact not just with the city inhabitants, but also to meet someone from the city office."

The Plover's Wing is Coates's film of his meeting with the mayor. His "technique" involves getting his audience to ask him a question, the answer to which he seeks by entering into a trance.

In the film, Sasson asks Coates what to do about the problem of youth violence in his city. It is to his credit that he manages to keep a straight face as Coates, with a stuffed badger perched on his head, enters into his trance and begins "communicating with animal spirits", emitting a cacophony of weird noises.

The effect is hilarious, as well as a little unnerving.

After he surfaces, Coates talks about "meeting the plover" — a reference to the wading bird known for luring predators away from its young by pretending to be suffering an injury such as a broken wing.

This has the effect of making it an apparently more enticing target. His solution to Holon's social ills is to teach empathy and recognise that victim status is often used as justification for violent behaviour.

One can only guess what the city's rate-payers made of it all.

The Tate

The Plover's Wing is being screened as part of the Altermoderne contemporary art show at Tate Britain, London SW1 until April 26.