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“Cities,” write Sophie Watson and Gary Bridge, “are not simply material or lived spaces—they are also spaces of the imagination and spaces of representation.”<sup>i</sup> This idea came home to me one day in 2008 when, quite by chance, I was witness to an extraordinary and unexpected sight in the city of London: the dome of St Paul’s Cathedral washed in electric blue light overlaid with a series of text projections. I soon discovered that this was an installation by Martin Firrell called *The Question Mark Inside*, referring to the question mark that, according to the artist, lies inside us all. While single words lit up the dome—life, breath, thought, people, hope, love—whole phrases briefly illuminated the portico on the cathedral’s west façade, such as:

- Organised religion makes me uneasy
- What do we really mean by freedom?
- Grief deepens our experience of being alive
- We will unseat dishonest government
- Why do we allow poverty to continue?
- Morality without religious dogma
- Panic rising about a life not properly lived

Each projected word and phrase had been selected following a survey to examine public responses to the question of what gives richness, meaning, and purpose to life. The quotations resonated with the language of the church but equally gave expression to concerns we might justifiably label secular, even irreligious. Through the month of November the cathedral was transformed into a surface for inscription, a screen for projected values and meaning that reflected back to the city the thoughts of its inhabitants.

In *Faith in the Public Square*, Rowan Williams debates the church’s modern role in the public life of the nation. In a brief reference to art he highlights its capacity to express and explore perspectives on cultural and religious life perhaps inaccessible by other means. If the main task of the church, as he later proposes, “is to create ‘spaces’ for an alternative story” to that promulgated by secular modernity, it may be precisely through artistic projects of this kind that such alternatives can be imagined.<sup>ii</sup> These created spaces not only make visible alternative viewpoints to those apparently held by the church but actually reaffirm that which is so often forgotten: that the mission of the church extends beyond its ‘spiritual’ purview to encompass social, political, environmental, as well as artistic concerns. Crucially, Firrell’s installation draws attention to the physical presence of the church edifice itself within its urban environment, and thus reminds us of its enduring relevance to the modern world.

At various times and places similar strategies have been used to good effect, turning the surface of the church into a screen for projected imaginings or alternative stories. Firrell works within a tradition exemplified above all by the artist Jenny Holzer, known for her projections of texts onto the façades of public buildings. In 2010 the Alte Nikolaikirche, the Dreikönigskirche and St Katharinenkirche in Frankfurt were given the Holzer treatment, this time in words drawn from the writings of some of Germany’s most celebrated intellectuals, among them Goethe, Fromm, and Adorno. Unlike Firrell’s texts, which briefly appear and disappear, Holzer’s are more overtly durational. Sentences scroll across the skin of the church as each text

unfolds, encouraging passersby to pause, waiting for the words to resolve themselves into a meaningful message.

In both cases, as spaces of imagination and representation, the content compels people to linger but it is the arresting form that captures their attention. We can admire the surface play of light on stone as we immerse ourselves in the story being told. More significantly, perhaps, the familiar architectural landscape of public spaces is reanimated through such artistic interventions provoking, as one observer of Holzer's installation put it, "a conversation between city, religion and art."<sup>iii</sup> It matters, then, that it is churches onto which these words, messages and meanings are projected. Whether it is with the thoughts of great minds or the reflections of the public this is a conversation in which the church has been accorded a foundational role.

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<sup>i</sup> S. Watson and G. Bridge, "City Imaginaries," in S. Watson and G. Bridge (eds), *A Companion to the City*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, p. 7

<sup>ii</sup> R. Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, London: Bloomsbury, 2012, p. 43

<sup>iii</sup> F. von Büнау, "Introduction," in E. Stiftung and F. von Büнау, (eds), *For Frankfurt: Jenny Holzer*, Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2010, p. 11