

# Ritual: Live Art or Group Therapy?

## Introduction

Philosophers have seen ritual and the arts as closely linked since early historical times: 2½ thousand years ago, Plato speculated that the origins of Ancient Greek theatre might have lain in the activities of the ritual cults which abounded in the classical world.

Although the early Christian Church forbade the depiction of real objects, so as to avoid the possibility of idolatry, generations of congregations found this restriction of their ritual environment so unbearable that by medi-aeval times there were many schools of cathedral and church art across Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa.

Islam has a similar restriction, which is still rigidly adhered to; but this by no means prevented the development of various Islamic religious styles of abstract decoration.

Late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century interest in anthropology and psychology led the early Bauhaus school into performances of esoteric rituals, seen as critical for the creative artistic process, though not necessarily intended for any audience, or related to any particular works of art.

Ritual has been extensively revisited by various conceptual artists: Themes such as the involvement of the audience in a work; the collection of 'artefacts' from conceptual happenings; repetitive themes, motifs and actions; narrative sequences of images/happenings; all these have their origins in the modern deconstruction of ritual.

More alarming is that a definition of ritual given by the anthropologist Catherine Bell – that ritual is any social activity that is non-utilitarian (not practically useful) – is extremely close to the philosopher Ayn Rand's definition of art – that Art is any social activity that is non-utilitarian.

## What is Ritual?

Say the word "Ritual" to any 'average' citizen, and they will probably think of one of the following: The film "The Wicker Man", Druids at Stonehenge, Catholic Mass, or possibly "Ritual Child Abuse" ... But what is ritual really?

150 years ago, anthropologists were interested in the parallels between 'heathen' religious practice as found around the various European empires, and home-grown Christian practices. Some set out to bolster the idea of European supremacy by demonstrating that other religions were somehow more primitive, while others set out to level Christianity to 'just another' world religion. Whichever side they were on,

they were only really interested in ‘religious’ practices, involving the worship of supernatural powers.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the pioneering psychologist, Sigmund Freud, had noted the similarity of “Obsessive Compulsive Disorder” to many repetitive religious practices. Anthropologists started to classify non-religious, but apparently compulsive, social acts as ritualistic – such as the daily rituals of going to bed and getting up, and the many-times daily greeting rituals, such as the shaking of hands.

Many contemporary anthropologists suspect that the whole idea of “ritual” is artificial, and was created by early anthropologists as a category of behaviour that helped to explain their own post-enlightenment culture, rather than to explain the practices of other cultures, most of which have little if any notion of ‘ritual’ as something set apart from daily life.

However, the anthropologist Catherine Bell has suggested 6 characteristics of activities which make them seem more ritual-like: Traditionalism, Invariance, Performance, Rule-Governance, Formality and Sacral Symbolism. The more of these aspects are perceived in an activity, the more likely ‘ordinary’ people are to see the activity as ritualistic.

I have developed a similar, and closely related, psychological approach, which looks at techniques for manipulating peoples’ behaviour and expectations. The more of these techniques are used in an activity, the more likely people are to see the activity as ritualistic. These techniques include hypnotic-style suggestion (e.g. chanting), identification of self with a symbol, symbolic acts (which alter expectations), reflection, catharsis and witnessing.

## **Ritual as a Context**

Ritual is not often seen as a context in its own right. Most art commentators prefer to see “Religion” and “Religious Buildings” as contexts for art. Insofar as ritual is considered, it is simply an activity that takes place within a religious context.

From the Angels of Dragan Andjelic displayed in St. Paul’s Cathedral in 2002, to the iconic images decorating the Fireflies ashram in Bangalore, by the contemporary artist Caroline Mackenzie, religion continues to provide a challenging meeting point between ancient and modern.

Of course, the opportunities for creative expression extend far beyond image: new theatre, music, dance, poetry and literature all have a place in the traditional halls of worship.

However, it must be admitted that our contemporary religious buildings, be they synagogues, mosques, churches or temples, have been constructed primarily as places within which ritual can take place. Consequently, I would contend that religious buildings lie within the context of ritual, not the other way round.

Further, there are growing ecumenical and inter-faith movements, where ritual becomes the framework within which dogma, belief and faith are re-negotiated. These movements provide particularly fertile ground for new art, and new collaboration.

Neither need Ritual be confined to the realms of conventional and traditional religions. The new “Earth Worship” religions, such as the druidic revival, and the various factions of Wicca and Asatru, all provide scope for challenging temporary outdoor works and happenings, with very different technical demands and audience requirements. Within many of these “New Religions” ritual becomes primary, while dogma and belief are often vague and sometimes altogether absent.

With the liberalisation of the marriage laws to include same-sex partnerships, and the increased demands for flexibility that these have placed on registry offices, there is now a huge (largely untapped) potential for creative interventions in humanistic civil ceremonies.

## **Ritual as Group Therapy**

The psychological theory of ritual has focussed mainly on the roots of ritualisation in the psychological development of the individual. Freud felt that ‘obsessive compulsive’ ritualisation is a repeating pattern of behaviour attempting (and repeatedly failing) to absolve the individual from guilt. For Freud, the ritualistic worship of ‘God the Father’ is a collective attempt to expiate our guilt for overthrowing our Father (male) or desiring our Father (female).

Other psychological theories, most notably Assagioli’s theory of psychosynthesis, have been more positive about the origins of, and the potential within, ritual activity. For Assagioli, ritual is a means for ‘raising consciousness’ into the higher realms of the unconscious, and making contact with positive psychological forces that may enhance our lives, and help to heal old wounds. Ritual is often used therapeutically within the school of psychosynthesis, where it manifests as a motley collection of rites drawn from around the world, purporting to stem from ancient traditions such as native American or Australian.

Such rituals can be interpreted in the traditional school of Group Therapy: Therapy for the individual, taking place in a group activity.

While psychologists have focussed on the individual, Anthropologists and Social Scientists have focussed on the collective. Ritual has been extensively described as a ‘normalising’ process within society, assisting societies to cope with change and conflict.

Seasonal Rituals can be seen as a means to ‘normalise’ seasonal change, while rites of passage (e.g. manhood rites) normalise biological change (Van Gennep).

The ritual slaughter of pigs in New Guinea (Rappaport) which have the practical effect of carefully managing a scarce resource, can be seen as normalising the changes in supply and demand – pig meat is highly valued in times of war, and may only be

eaten by warriors; but at other times, as long as supply remains buoyant, anyone may partake.

Ritual can also be used to defuse social tension and communal conflict. Studies in Zambia (Turner) demonstrate how social crises can be 'normalised' using ritual, resulting in a new social synthesis.

These kinds of ritual give a new meaning to Group Therapy: No longer therapy for a disturbed individual within a group, but therapy for a whole disturbed society.

## **Ritual as Live Art**

Ritual could easily be seen as performance art, or even a performing art (e.g. theatre), if only there was an audience. For in ritual, there are only participants. Everyone is a performer, and a part of the whole, and witness (audience) all at the same time.

However, it is clear that different kinds of ritual involve the participants to different degrees.

Catholic Mass, and other Catholic rites, performed in South America, have a very pronounced 'audience'/'performer' split. While the priest pronounces the sacred incantations in latin by the altar, some people sit and watch, many simply get on with their own magical rites in front of the statues of saints, while a handful hang out near the priest and take the sacrament.

At the other extreme, and in direct reaction to Catholicism, the Quaker "Meeting" is totally egalitarian. All participate equally in the Quaker silence, and anyone who feels moved by the spirit may speak ... or move, dance, sing, or express themselves creatively in any way.

One interesting thing about ritual is that it is inherently multi-artform. Most rituals involve some form of movement (even if it's only standing up, sitting down and kneeling, as in the less expressive Protestant churches), singing and poetry, in addition to visual elements.

It may of course be argued that an untrained group of people singing a 200 year old hymn is hardly a creative process. However, at the other extreme, I have attended a ritual in which a composer and a poet had collaborated to produce a 5 part sung piece: During the ceremony, the participants were taught the piece, and in just 20 minutes had given a performance in 5 part harmony ... with only themselves as audience.

In a more secular setting, I was once invited to attend a rare performance of a small group calling themselves Essential Theatre (note: there may be more than one group who go by this name!), who meet each month to improvise theatre and movement. A couple of times a decade they have performed, but only to an audience selected for their willingness and ability to join in with the improvised proceedings.

After the 9/11 tragedy, I knew many creative people who were profoundly disturbed by international events. I organised a ‘ritual’ gathering to explore the ‘meaning’ of events (whatever that may mean!). Although structured to a degree both in space and time, the event included large sections of improvisation – music, poetry and dance, as well as straightforward discussion. This was by no means religious activity, neither was it utilitarian; it was certainly not rehearsal, nor a creative brainstorming session. In its effect of facilitating the participants to interpret their world, and orientate themselves within it, the event was definitely ‘artistic’, but with the lack of an audience, was it really Live Art, or even Art at all?

## **The idea of Creative Ritual**

Two of the chief characteristics of ritual, as defined by Catharine Bell – Traditionalism and Invariance – mitigate heavily against Ritual being accepted as an art form in its own right. How can something essentially tradition-bound and invariant be considered creative?

There is a fundamental paradox here: Activities *perceived* as traditional are more likely to be seen as ritual, and activities *perceived* as invariant are more likely to be seen as ritual. However, perceptions can be deceiving.

One poignant example here is the ‘traditional’ pageant associated with the British Monarchy. Almost anything to do with coronations, jubilees, royal weddings, etc. is perceived to be archaic and steeped in ‘hundreds of years’ of traditions. Yet most of the pageantry was invented for Queen Victoria (the old style of pageant for a mere monarch wasn’t seen as fitting for an Empress), and even when it was first performed, was still perceived by the public to be terribly traditional.

Invariance is another misplaced perception. Early anthropologists, and even learned men like James Frazer and Freud, saw ritual activity as essentially unchanging. Somehow they had failed to assimilate the catastrophic changes in European Christian ritual from Catholic to Protestant, and they similarly seemed blind to the fact that the rituals of the so-called primitive peoples they liked to observe were changing all the time.

Likewise, participants in a series of rituals become highly attuned to the similarities between successive performances, and less consciously aware of the differences.

Consequently I see no fundamental paradox between the ideas of “creative” and “ritual”, and would advocate the consideration of ‘creative ritual’ as an artform in its own right.

The reason I take this position is not entirely due to a tendency (which we all share!) for self-aggrandisement. I have moved over the years from participating in multi-artform pieces and events, to organising multi-artform pieces and events, and over the last 10 years, to designing and organising ‘ritual’ events.

In planning a multi-artform piece, I consider very carefully what I am responding to, who the intended audience are, what prior pieces and historical movements I am building upon, what kind of effect I am aiming for, the degree to which I will interpret a piece to the audience, who I will collaborate with, the materials and techniques I will use, and the place.

Likewise in planning a ritual – I consider what I am responding to (is it a change in seasons, or a change in a couple's social status from single to married, etc.?), who the intended audience are (traditionalists, creatives, whose friends, whose family?), what traditions I am building upon (Northern European pre-Christian, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Hindu, contemporary, historical?), what 'ritual effect' is intended, the degree to which I will interpret to the audience, who I will collaborate with, the materials and techniques (psychological as well as creative), and the place.

Just the same methods that I've always used in my creative process.

### **Ritual as a form of Art**

In exploring the possibility of considering Ritual as a form of Art, I've referred to many commentators for their thoughts on the crucial distinctions. The most succinct exposition is put forward by Anna Halprin, a dance and movement artist who also does a lot of ritual.

Halprin sees three fundamental properties of Ritual as distinguishing it from Art: 1) In Ritual, the audience are also the performers; 2) Ritual calls on a higher, &/or supernatural power; 3) Ritual happens in the context of, and promotes, a particular system of beliefs.

Distinction 1) has been repeatedly, and successfully, challenged by innumerable live and interactive art works over the last 30 years, so I don't think this objection can be seriously considered any more.

Distinction 2) is a serious one, more easily addressed from the psychological standpoint. Various early psychologists, most notably C. G. Jung and Assagioli, attempted to encompass spiritual and supernatural experience into their theories of mind. Broadly, they substituted the idea of an external 'god' with the idea of an internal 'archetype', an essential element of the human psyche.

Whether or not the details of their theories hold up to scrutiny (which they don't, really!), they made an important point: that spiritual experience is possible without recourse to supernatural explanations.

My approach to this problem in designing a ritual is that I'm very careful simply not to mention supernatural powers. For instance, in a celebration of death, I refer to summoning 'memories' of the dead, rather than 'spirits' of the dead, etc. This approach still leaves it open for the individual to interpret the ritual in terms of the supernatural, but doesn't force it. For me, the success of this approach is evidenced by the repeated attendance of some rationalist atheists at my ceremonies.

Distinction 3) highlights the way in which religious rituals have been used, and mis-used for thousands of years: as a method of imprinting the authority of the priesthood, and emperor, onto the minds of ritual participants. But ritual doesn't have to be this way. Ritual can draw symbolism from a range of belief systems, and can encourage individual participants to explore their own beliefs ... it just depends on how it's done.

My approach to this final problem is threefold: First, to construct any given ceremony from a range of traditions, ancient, modern, European, American, Eastern, etc. For the essential information, I draw heavily on the anthropological and archaeological literature. In advance of the ceremony, I always gather the participants together and explain the traditions I have plundered ... and then leave any conclusions to the participants themselves to draw.

Second, I use symbols and imagery in the ritual space, poems, songs, myths, etc. which are either abstract, or open-ended in their interpretation. This encourages participants to draw their own meaning from their surroundings, and from the ritual process itself.

Third, as far as possible (the smaller the number of participants, the easier this is), I make a space in the structure of the ritual for individuals to creatively express themselves. When it's a group of artists, this can be an improvised performance (see Sept 11 above), or when it's a large gathering of people, can be something more simple like hanging wishes on a wishing tree.

Thus I feel that Halprin's 3 distinctions between ritual and art have been dismantled. So given these conditions – that a ritual makes no appeal to the supernatural, or higher powers, and that symbolism is abstract, open-ended and to a certain extent generated by the participants themselves – I can see no distinction between this 'creative' kind of ritual, and art.

## **Conclusion**

So how does ritual relate to the arts? Context, Art Form, Live Art, Group Therapy? It is all these things, and none. Our every move, our every gesture, can be interpreted as ritualistic to some extent; Equally, everything we do can be seen as a creative expression, an observation from which Gilbert and George have built a whole career.

For, as quantum scientists noted half a century ago, what we see depends on how we look at it. If we arrive at a gallery looking for art, that is what we shall find, but if we arrive at the same place seeking ritual, we'll find that in abundance too!

Likewise, when we arrive at a fire set in a dark forest, surrounded by chanting, dancing performers, we may see either art, ritual or both. But when we join in the dance and song, these distinctions lose their relevance – for a few sacred minutes we can lose ourselves in that flow of consciousness, the fount of madness, the ultimately mysterious root of inspiration.