

Dancing in the Abyss - living with liminality¹

Sophia arrived twelve weeks early in Singleton hospital, Swansea on 25th February 2012. Feeling helpless and unable to influence the course of our baby's progress, we sit beside her incubator trying to make sense of the flashing numbers on the ventilator that breathes for her. Reassurance comes in the form of a young nurse named Stephanie, who performs her ritual cares with presence and love. The clock indicates that hours have slipped by, but we experience time differently, as though suspended, punctuated only by the need to eat, drink, sleep.

'Death stalks the room' my partner observes grimly about the intensive care unit where Sophia lives with five other babies. Having spent the last twenty years engaged with creative arts of various sorts as an artist, curator and writer, most of what I have produced or experienced in the name of art seems utterly inadequate when faced with a life-or-death situation such as this, but it also brings into sharp relief the events I have witnessed or participated in and the artists I have engaged with over the years whose works remain meaningful in spite of, or perhaps because of my current situation. The projects I'm going to reflect on here, some my own and some by other artists, all address directly or obliquely those great and unavoidable human transitions of birth and death.

Walking a fine line between art and anthropology, my practice has focused on liminality and ritual creativity, based on the premise that it is possible for artists to draw audiences into an experience of liminality through ritual patterns, sometimes with profound and surprising effects. Since the 60's the term *liminal* has been appropriated from its anthropological origins by cultural theorists to describe a vast number of creative activities often without reference to its ritual

¹ See Ronald L. Grimes *Deeply into the Bone* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000) p.4 'I dance into the abyss that comfortably separates the spiritual from the social scientific, the personal from the scholarly, and the narrative from the analytical'.

context, and then it becomes a very slippery term indeed, often confused with transgressive, unquantifiable or marginal. But I use it strictly to describe an experience during which the normal linear and day to day experiences of time and space are suspended, a different state of consciousness is achieved and the possibility of transformation, however small, arises. Why is it important to experience liminality? And why might art be an appropriate vehicle for this? Victor Turner perceived that ritual is in decline in modern societies, having shifted from a collective, often obligatory activity to fragmented practices on the periphery of the social process. Turner proposes that ritual is a response to the division, alienation and exploitation that are associated with everyday social structure. By suspending these structures through liminal space, ritual may create direct and egalitarian exchanges and invite experimentation with alternative relations. Turner uses the term *communitas* to refer to 'a quality of human interrelatedness that can "emerge" from or "descend" upon two or more human beings' during the liminal phase of a ritual action. *Communitas* unmask the arbitrary distinctions inherent to social structure and allows humans to interact with one another, 'not as role players but as "human totals", integral beings who share the same humanity'. It also represents 'the desire for a total unmediated relationship between person and person...in the very act of realizing their commonness'. It is not an expression of a type of herd instinct, but of humans 'in their wholeness wholly attending'.² Turner does not deny the need for structure within society, but believes that our need for *communitas* is just as great.

Contemporary art practice that employs ritual patterns could be identified with Turner's concept of the liminoid; that is liminal activities carried out in western cultures that are not connected to the hegemonic social structures of politics or religion, but provide opportunities to let go of structural commitments, if only

² Victor Turner in Bobby C. Alexander *Victor Turner Revisited: Ritual as Social Change* (GA Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1991) pp. 18-35

briefly. 'Ritual, like art, is a child of the imagination', says Ronald Grimes.³ In its independence from organised religion, art provides a space to 'play' (albeit seriously) and to test out in a material and embodied way ideas that do not conform to the dominant culture. Performative arts in particular lend themselves to ritual experimentation because they can meet some of ritual's essential requirements, for example ritual is understood as *action* not just thought, and it is *performed*. Classic 20th Century examples include the Ulay/Abramovic performance collaborations of the 1970's and 1980's and Joseph Beuys's *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), a five day performance/ritualization with a coyote. Art, like ritual, is associated with the cultural realm of ideas, symbols and aesthetics, both have a social and collective dimension and take place in the subjunctive mood, a realm of pure possibility in which experiences generated *could* introduce innovations into the social structure.

Two questions have motivated me in recent years: Could ritual enactment through art practice draw audiences/participants into liminal space? And could this create the potential for transformation? In attempting to find practical approaches to these questions, I have been mostly feeling about in the dark, and occasionally stumbling upon something that 'works'. For each project that has achieved some success there have been one or two others that have fallen short. I have paid increasing attention to the responses of audiences/participants in order to seek tangible evidence that people have been genuinely affected by works rather than simply entertained.

The project *sleepers* was originally developed in Belfast in 2003 when I was asked to create an exhibition in a gallery that had once been the site of the public unwrapping of an Egyptian mummy, now housed in the Ulster Museum. Disturbed by the disrespect this event seemed to show for the different cultural values and beliefs of the inhabitant of the body, I wanted to create a situation

³ Ronald L. Grimes *Deeply into the Bone* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000) p.4

where the mummy could be retrieved from the position of a passive object of curiosity. This was also informed by my research into the sleeper in esoteric western folklore who is depicted as an active agent full of potential, dreaming the world into being. I invited people to sleep in the park beside the museum on blankets at dusk. A few years later when I had moved to Pembrokeshire, I visited Ty Canol woods, and felt that this magical ancient oak woodland would be an ideal setting for another version of *sleepers*. This time, I advertised more widely and invited people to 'become a communal dreamer'. Over seventy people from all sorts of backgrounds took part, ranging from the ages of 3 to 83. On a bright April afternoon, everyone found a place to slumber, and the event was documented with stills and moving image. Here are responses from two of the participants:

Tycanol always has a special 'embracing' atmosphere but in spite of so many people gathered the lack of human noise seemed to make one aware of the sounds of other stimuli around us... It was a good experience to BE with so many people and to experience the silence and stillness together.

...great humour as each person was there for their own reasons in their own way and although dozens together resting, all alone in the rest in the quiet.... We were all changed when we moved again to leave the different nests and perches we had chosen or had chosen us. I was moved by the grace of people letting go, being, suspended in time, out of time. I felt such affection for us as we rose, crumpled, altered. The experience felt like a powerful act.

Later we ate stew, drank wine and danced to a Caleigh band in the nearby village hall and it felt as though a bond had formed between these strangers that perhaps was akin to Turner's *communitas*.



The film that was created from *sleepers* was arguably less successful than the event. I learnt that making a film *about* ritual enactment can really only serve documentary purposes, but a film that draws audiences into liminal space must also echo ritual in its structure and flow. In 2008, whilst expecting my first child, I created a video installation called *Vigil*, which attempted to do just that. Places that have drawn me to them again and again are often the starting point for a new project. *Vigil* explores the presence that Strumble Head Lighthouse has on the surrounding landscape in North Pembrokeshire. Strumble Head was built in 1908, and its rotating beam can be seen for thirty miles in all directions. Every lighthouse has its own distinctive “character”, recognised by a pattern and duration of flashes, in this case one flash every two seconds four times followed by seven seconds of darkness. *Vigil* suggests that this rhythm has permeated the land for over a hundred years, seeping into the psyche of its inhabitants.

The installation also portrays the lighthouse as a threshold place, situated between land and sea, day and night and human and animal kingdoms, born and

unborn. 5:1 surround sound immerses the audience in the work, which uses Strumble's regulated light pattern as a guide for editing both picture and sound, inviting quiet contemplation of the internal and external rhythms that influence our daily experiences, rituals and memories.

Flashes of light zip along telegraph wires. A horse munches grass in the twilight. A heavily pregnant woman sitting by a window in the dark is illuminated rhythmically by beams of light. A new rhythm is set by an *in utero* heartbeat and a distant barking dog. Submerging underwater, the heartbeat quickens in response to a seal approaching and gliding past. Above water, the howling of baby seals from the bays below the lighthouse sound just like a crying infant.

very alive, I felt a part of the video
so moving and evocative, almost indescribable.
a very powerful and stirring piece
sound elemental vision archetypal resonance primal



Another strand of my practice has been to work in a curatorial role with other artists. In 2008, I co-ordinated *Holy Hiatus*, a series of public art events in the market town of Cardigan, west Wales. In meditation and spiritual practices that

involve ritual pattern making, 'holy hiatus' refers to the crossing of the boundary between inner and outer consciousness. The purpose of such practices is to allow inner processes to manifest as outer forms – a method that has strong analogies with art-making. The project focused on social ritual, community and public places to examine the ways that artists can draw audiences into different, often unexpected, experiences of place through ritual. Alastair MacLennan worked on the footbridge over the River Teifi for twelve hours, tying ribbon, greenery and paper boats to the railings. When asked what he was doing he replied that he was 'celebrating a birth'. I later found out that it was for my daughter Ffion, who was born three weeks later. One witness described it as 'temporary, very subtle and jubilant within Cardigan, that kind of lifted people' Another said:

As we approached the bridge we saw a man in a black hat doing something with purpose and rhythm, which was calming and we saw the white ribbons on the bridge. By the time we reached him, I felt calmer. I was surprised because he looked up and said "hello", but without shifting from what he was doing, which made you feel part of it. It was like watching someone knitting or sewing, the rhythm and repetition draws you in; it separates you from your head and you're in the rhythm. Like when you listen to music and you're in the melody. It was a very profound place to be – in his ritual.

Maura Hazelden collaborated with acoustic singer Lou Laurens to create a six-hour performance in the Small World Theatre that explored ritual and prayer. Maura performed a cycle of simple movements, while from the balcony above Lou sang the thirteenth century Anglo-Saxon *Worldes Blis*

Worldes blis ne last no throwe;
it went and wit away anon...

*Worldly bliss lasts but a moment
It is here then it disappears...*

The work provoked powerful responses from many who witnessed it. One woman described it as 'quite amazing...it got you thinking about humanity as it is

and was and what we're doing or not doing. There was a lot of thinking to be done after it'. Other responses included:

Well, it affected me because it was the first time we'd been in that particular theatre...and then when Maura started, I was fascinated by simply watching her feet, although she used the whole of her body, I just focused on that...we simply sat, completely silent, and it was as though we were meditating, and the mantra was her movements.

it was like seeing something very beautiful or like experiencing nature in a way, a kind of quietness came over you and you sort of took it in, the same reverence you might have for a kind of quality of really paying attention.



Since the original 2008 Holy Hiatus event, Maura and Lou have recreated the work every year in the same venue on the same day. 2012 will be the fifth version of the ritual. Each year the audio recordings are replayed in the space from the previous year and new life elements introduced. Lou wrote that 'Holy Hiatus feels more and more part of the year to Maura and me - a kind of marker in our lives'.

One of the audience members for *Holy Hiatus* described how in her experience there was no clear division between the 'artworks' and the everyday experiences of the place and community:

When I was down on the quayside...it was about to really pour with rain so I went into the Grovenor Pub to shelter and there were people in there. I think there'd been a funeral, well, there were people dressed in black ties so I presumed that was what was going on and that experience was as much part of whatever was going on outside, so to be in that pub with people and sheltering from the rain and a bit of interaction with people coming through the door and you were part of something...there it was in front of you're eyes and I'll remember that with fondness...I suppose because I'm from Cardigan as well so what I liked was going somewhere really familiar and there was something strange happening on the bridge... some public art happening but everybody was sheltering in this pub, looking through the door...and somebody had died, but there we were.

The responses to the 2008 Holy Hiatus events demonstrated that there was a desire for more exploration of the relationships between art, liminality and ritual. In 2010, I curated a two-day symposium; a mixture of talks, film screenings, performances and included a workshop by ritual theorist and practitioner Ron Grimes. When I invited him to lead a workshop, Ron had hesitated, concerned that a disparate group of strangers from diverse backgrounds might not feel comfortable enough with each other to benefit from the experience. Around thirty-five people participated in the workshop, which took place in the main circular vaulted room of the Small World Theatre, in which had been placed various objects such as cloth, sticks, buckets, and a coracle boat. We were invited to spontaneously enact, without discussion, a funerary ritual for a stuffed figure, vaguely human in shape using the objects at our disposal. Many of us hung back to begin with, unsure how to contribute, or looking for validation for our tentative interactions, but gradually we became absorbed in the task, which slowly built in energy and confidence, and came to its own natural conclusion. Afterwards, as we sat stunned and surprised by our own actions, we talked about the experience. One woman described movingly how the ritual had extended and connected to a funeral of an old friend she had attended that morning. Another

participant invited us all to orchestrate his funeral, should the need arise. Later, other workshop members described the workshop as ‘a powerful and bonding experience’ where ‘we became a group rather than individuals’.



On the symposium in general, another wrote to say that he found the event to be ‘an integrating experience’. Other comments suggested that Turner’s *communitas* could be a tangible reality and not just an idealized fantasy:

we performed, we formed and...a sense of a mutually shared interests was present in the ‘community’ of the symposium

Two years on from the last Holy Hiatus event, I am still reflecting on its impact and potential and considering where to go next. Ritualization contributes to the vital dynamic flow between life experience and creative practice, and for this reason it deserves our attention. My own experiences have reminded me that in modern societies we often struggle to find the tools to create meaningful rituals

that guide us through both painful and celebratory occasions when the need arises. Books and theories are useful, but as Grimes says, the “only option is to enter the fray.”⁴ We labor on, adapting, inventing, creating. Fear of failure must be balanced with the risk of losing touch with the fundamental rhythms of human existence. Grimes warns, “If we do not birth and die ritually, we will do so technologically, inscribing technocratic values into our very bones.”⁵ Studying the responses of participants of Holy Hiatus events and workshops has led me to believe that people from disciplines across the arts and humanities crave more opportunities to experience ritual liminality in direct and embodied ways, even if this is also challenging at times. Possibilities are arising to turn Holy Hiatus into a formal organisation, enabling more events throughout the year. As for my artistic practice, I see greater confluence emerging between that and Holy Hiatus; I am currently collaborating with Lou Laurens to translate a CTG trace of a labor and birth into song, which will be performed live as a Holy Hiatus event.

For Sophia as she makes her way through life; for all mothers who brush with death in childbirth and for baby Tomos who didn't make it this time.

⁴ Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, p.5

⁵ *Ibid*, p.13