

## Inventing rituals; inhabiting places – ritual and community in public art

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### Abstract

In May 2008, five temporary art events were commissioned by Ruth Jones in public spaces in Cardigan (Wales) as part of the project *Holy Hiatus*. The project explored the possibilities for ritual to be employed creatively in public art practice, and to examine the ways that artists can draw audiences into unexpected and potentially 'liminal' experiences of place through ritual. Some people locally and from further a field knew about the events through publicity material or word of mouth, and made an active decision to attend, while others came across interventions unexpectedly whilst going about their daily business: for example, Alastair MacLennan was working on the footbridge over the River Teifi for twelve hours, tying ribbon, greenery and paper boats to the railings and talking to curious users of the bridge; while Simon Whitehead worked with dancers Kate Willis and Andrea Buckley to create an improvised dance *Drift* (which followed the flow of the tides) through the town over three days. A few people living in and around Cardigan became collaborators through their involvement in the artists' projects; Yvonne Buchheim created a public performance at Cardigan swimming pool in collaboration with two local swimmers and two singers and Anna Lucas spent three weeks meeting teenagers in West Wales who were actively involved with working animals, in order to gather film footage for a new video installation that was exhibited in the Pendre Art Gallery. Maura Hazelden collaborated with acoustic singer Lou Laurens and created a six-hour performance in the newly built Small World Theatre: a company deeply engaged with local communities. The temporary, mobile and in some cases, understated nature of the works meant that the impact was often subtle, but the artworks nonetheless created a ripple of effect for both active and incidental audiences, leading witnesses to wonder what they had just seen and to what extent they had knowingly, or unknowingly, participated.

Following the completion of the projects, a series of interviews with twelve audience members were carried out by researcher Sarah Pace from Safle (an independent public art consultancy based in Cardiff) in order to gain an insight into how the artworks were received. This article integrates the findings from these with theoretical understandings of ritual – from fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural and communication theory. The article begins by laying out the arguments for and against the creative potential of ritual. The interviewees' experiences of the artworks for *Holy Hiatus* are then compared to find support for the proposition that experiences of liminality are possible in public art projects that employ ritual. Finally, the article looks at how experiencing public rituals in places that are familiar to us might alter our perception of those places in both exciting and challenging ways.

The names of the interviewees have been altered to maintain anonymity.

### **What is ritual?**

The vast multiplicity of activities that come under the broad banner of 'ritual' makes definition of the term virtually impossible. Operating sometimes as verb, sometimes as noun or adjective, ritual can be interpreted as 'concept, praxis, process, ideology, yearning, experience, function' (Schechner 1993: 228). Ritual is used to refer to everyday events such as mealtimes, as well as to annual celebrations and special occasions like weddings. It covers the simplest of acts, for example a handshake, through to the most structured and highly ceremonial public events such as a coronation. As Eric W. Rothenbuhler has warned, a concept designed to cover such diverse territory is 'in danger of being vacuously abstract' (Rothenbuhler 1998: 6), or as Richard Schechner suggests 'it means very little because it means too much' (Schechner 1993: 228).

There are, however, some commonly accepted qualities associated with ritual that theorists of the subject generally agree upon, the most significant of these is that ritual is understood as *action* not simply thought and also that it is *performed*, and marked by heightened aesthetics. In addition to these typical aspects of ritual, a number of other characteristics

feature to a greater or lesser extent: there is usually something conscious and voluntary about a ritual, people are aware at some level that they are participating, although they may choose their form of participation, (performer or witness), and choose the style of their participation, (enthusiastic or reluctant). Rituals have no direct utilitarian function, but relate to the cultural realm of ideas, symbols and aesthetics of social activity. Rituals may be celebratory but are not just recreational; they contribute to or reinforce what anthropologist Emile Durkheim referred to as the 'serious life'. Rituals have a social or collective dimension, even when they are solitary or idiosyncratic there is always some aspect that embodies cultural codes and expresses social relations. Rituals are often repetitive or have their own social rhythm that is distinct from day-to-day linear time. It is also generally agreed that ritual does *not* equate to habit or routine, empty convention or insincere public performance (see Rothenbuhler 1998: 3–27).

### **Creative or conservative?**

Within social anthropology, there are two polarized perspectives about ritual: 'structural-functional' models suggest that ritual is a tool for imposing hierarchical social and religious power, and 'communitarian' models, in which choice, creativity and egalitarianism are always possible in ritual action resulting from the uncertain, 'playful' and potentially transformative liminal realm. Victor Turner was a prominent advocate of the generative potential of liminality. Other supporters of this perspective include Ronald Grimes and Bobby Alexander. It is a fascination with the creative potential of ritual that provides a primary link between the disciplines of art and anthropology and there are many well-known twentieth century examples of artists engaging with ritual: for example, Maya Deren's experimental ritual films such as *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), the Ulay/Abramovic performance collaborations of the 1970s and 1980s, and Joseph Beuys' durational performances including *I Like America and America likes me* (1974), a five-day performance/ritual with a coyote.

While many artists see the creative potential of ritual, not all anthropologists share this view. Key figures that have emphasized the 'structural-functional' qualities of ritual include Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Maurice Bloch. In his essay 'Symbols, song,

dance and features of articulation: Is religion an extreme form of traditional authority?' Bloch uses the example of circumcision ceremonies of the Merina of Madagascar to illustrate how ceremonial speech in ritual acts is 'impoverished' and restrictive compared to day-to-day verbal exchange. He then extends his discussion to song, and then finally to dance, suggesting that there is no potential for body movements in dance that allow for bargaining, argument or discussion, these being 'replaced by fixed, repeated, fused messages' (Bloch 1989: 38). For Bloch, to accept this code implies compulsion: 'Communication has stopped being a dialectic and has become a matter of repeating correctly' (Bloch 1989: 38). Bloch's essay is based on his research into particular ritual activities in the context of conservative tribal religious ceremonies, but from this particular situation, he makes the rather generalized conclusion that art is in fact an inferior form of communication because it disallows the generative potential of language. He accepts that this theory goes against the grain of art as a 'kind of super-communication, a supreme occasion for creativity' (Bloch 1989: 38), and he seeks to find a reason as to why art should be believed by the majority of people to be creative:

*The reason for this view probably lies in the fact that the generative processes of language are normally unconscious and that they are so complicated that they cannot be raised to a conscious level. However, when nearly all this generative potential of language (or bodily movement) has been forbidden, removed, the remaining choices left are so simple that they can suddenly become controllable, hence enjoyable. This, however, is an illusion of creativity; in fact this is the sphere where it occurs least.*

(Bloch 1989: 38)

Clearly, Bloch is not concerned in this instance with contemporary and experimental art practices, but his ideas are relevant here because three of the art projects for *Holy Hiatus* involved song or dance. Simon Whitehead and his collaborators performed an improvised dance *Drift* through the town centre, Yvonne Buchheim's swimming pool public event involved two singers, and Maura Hazelden's performance involved dance-like movements while her collaborator Lou Laurens sang the thirteenth century *Worldes Blis Ne Laste* repeatedly. While these artists were almost certainly using song and dance with greater freedom than the subjects of Bloch's study, it raises the question, how do we know when

dance or song, or other art forms, are generative and when they are conservative? T.J Csordas has suggested, via the work of Stanley Tambiah on ritual language<sup>1</sup>, there is potential for creativity even within a highly structured ritual through its *performativity*. Csordas sees the fundamental difference between the methodologies of Bloch and Tambiah as ‘the perception by Bloch of a gap between a ritual form and its “use” and the perception by Tambiah of an integral connection between ritual form and its “performance”’ (Csordas 1997: 254).

Jens Kreinath in his essay ‘Ritual: Theoretical Issues in the Study of Religion’ (Kreinath 2005) has argued that there has been a tendency for rituals to be analysed in relation to the texts and discourses of religion. Ritual would therefore be seen as the symbolic representation of religious meaning. Kreinath claims that it is of vital importance that rituals are studied and theorized on their own terms, through looking at the actual performance of ritual action independently from religious frameworks, uncovering how they work, in and for themselves. He cites Clifford Geertz in suggesting that religion does not create ritual: rituals create religions. For Geertz, this is possible because rituals ‘act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence’ (Geertz in Kreinath 2005: 102). Kreinath wants to explore ritual as ‘a form of human action that establishes and transforms social relations’ (Kreinath 2005: 102). This perspective is most useful to understanding ritual within art practice, since it allows for creative innovation and does not assume that ritual is by nature authoritarian and conservative. The interviewees from *Holy Hiatus* also predominantly identified with this kind of definition of ritual, for example Stuart said: ‘you can create new rituals. There are historical rituals and so forth but that’s not the nature of ritual. The nature of ritual is to constantly be reinvented, find new ritualisations, new social understandings’.

As Csordas suggests, the only way the problem of creativity in ritual can be addressed is with an adequate theory of performance within the context of ritual. He proposes that such a theory must pay attention to three things: the *event* in relation to its situation and social life; the *genre*, and its context within a system of genres; and to the *act*. Creativity may be found to occur at any of these levels, or in the interaction between them. According to

Csordas, it is Bloch's lack of a theory of performance that allows him to see only constraints in ritual language, ignoring the rhetorical skill of the performer and the dynamics of the performer / audience relationship. In contrast, Schechner recognizes that: 'rituals are not safe deposit vaults of accepted ideas but in many cases dynamic performative systems generating new materials and recombining traditional action in new ways' (Schechner 1993: 228). He describes ritual as 'the continued encounter between imagination and memory translated into double acts of the body' (Schechner 1993: 263). Similarly, Csordas sees ritual language as a bodily tool 'for reordering the behavioural environment, cultivating the disposition of the habitus, and creating a sacred self' (Csordas 1997: 262).

So if we are to understand the creative application of ritual in relation to *Holy Hiatus* it is perhaps helpful to consider the contexts (genre, event, act) within which the art events took place. The project was advertised through brochures, and in local newspapers as a series of public art events that engage with ritual, and some audience members who had read the publicity material in advance and therefore came with certain expectations, were engaged actively from the outset. Many others encountered the works, particularly those by Alastair MacLennan and Simon Whitehead, spontaneously as they went about their own daily tasks. These people could choose to walk on, or to stop and engage, or even participate. For these people, it was not necessarily apparent that the events were 'art' – they were simply something unfamiliar happening in familiar places. With the partial exception of Buchheim's public event in Cardigan swimming pool, the events were not announced, nor did they make use of elaborate ceremonial trappings. However, the performances did involve simple objects (MacLennan: grass, paper, ribbons, stones; Whitehead: blue anoraks; Hazelden: thyme, water, paper, pebbles). In the case of MacLennan and Whitehead, some audience members interacted spontaneously through verbal language or bodily movement.

In terms of genre and event, the projects could perhaps be identified with Turner's concept of the liminoid: that is liminal activities carried out in western cultures that are not connected to the dominant social structures of politics or religion, but provide opportunities to let go of structural commitments, if only briefly. Liminoid activity is frequently secular, not necessarily collective or bound to calendrical or biological rhythms, and engagement is

optional, not obligatory. Film, theatre and other art forms are cited as examples. Liminoid events such as these would therefore seem to allow for greater creativity, and freedom of interpretation, therefore the question of whether each artwork employed ritual creatively can only really be approached via individual subjective responses, as what is understood by one witness participant as liberating, may be perceived by another as conservative.



From the small cross section of audience members who were interviewed, it appears that people did understand the artworks in *Holy Hiatus* as creative of meaning. Nia describes Simon Whitehead's collaborative performance as: 'about cutting through. It was a break, a change, a flip, a new perspective on people, movement, building, the high street'. Similarly, Rebecca says: 'I liked these blue flashes going across the bridge and it was like...just like a jar across reality, or something outside breaking across, but just in a split second'. Several of the interviewees describe how the artworks made them curious or fascinated long after the events were over. After witnessing MacLennan's public performance on the footbridge, Caroline says: 'I could have talked to him about what the grass was about, for instance, Alastair, what was the grass about? And why did he dress in black? I sort of wanted to know more so I had an urge to find out more and to get to grips with what it was about'. Lynn describes how Hazelden's collaborative performance with Lou Laurens in the Small World Theatre provoked much contemplation:

*It was quite amazing. It was not until I came out that I understood about the writing that was all over the floor and I saw the translation of what the piece was about outside, which 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.*

Jackie describes how Lucas's video installation of teenagers working with animals influenced her thinking about processes:

*it's something about detail...the one with the hawk...just the way she was winding the leather strap, for instance, you know, just those bits of detail that I think are really important and I think I've overlooked things like that and sort of thought, how something is done is less important than the finished product.*



Buchheim's public event in the swimming pool clearly resonated with creative possibilities for several of the interviewees. Lowri says the event: 'had a sense of creating a new ritual out of an everyday ritual – in this case swimming and singing – and transforming it into something else'. Stuart elaborated on the meanings that it generated for him:

*It actually made creative possibilities in the swimming pool, it played with the swimming pool potential, it played with the potential of the water, it played with the potential of the acoustic, and it did all those things and in a way it did all that on your behalf...and that was enjoyable, to see things being redrawn in that way...You can get very deep about it and I think there's resonances with birth and rebirth...it was as though the singers were celebrants, there were these non-participant individuals who just sat in these big bubbles but a different, a very different relationship with the water – they were on the water but not in the water, whereas the two swimmers were in the water all the time and that made you speculate about being part of something and not part of something.*



While the interviewees clearly enjoyed exploring possible meanings generated by the art events for *Holy Hiatus*, they also acknowledged that in some circumstances, structured ritual plays an important role. Stuart, who was about to undertake jury service, discussed how different that situation was to an art project:

*part of the ritualization of a courtroom has to indicate what the rights of people are and the limits of the process...I mean swearing on the bible or whatever you have to do...all of that has got a practical purpose...otherwise the system wouldn't work, would it?*

Kate points out that 'human beings need rituals; they are fundamental to our lives because we need to have security about our being in the world'. Nia described how when she was affected by periods of depression, simple day-to-day activities performed with attention, such as laying the table, was 'a method of clearing the fog and making a structure'. She adds: 'its all rather big, life's rather big and you sometimes need certain things that you can anchor onto'. Like many binaries, the polarity between structure and anti-structure, or liminality, is often unhelpful. The presence of structure does not deny creativity, in fact all action requires some degree of structure to be able to manifest. Perhaps the question posed should not be is the artwork creative or conservative, but how does it influence our perception of our relationships with others, with our wider environment, with place, and community, and how does this empower future action or thought in positive, inclusive and expansive ways? Schechner describes how the future of ritual lies in striking an essential balance between structure and anti-structure: '(r)itual's conservatism may restrain humans enough to prevent our extinction, while its magmatic creative core demands that human life – social, individual, maybe even biological – keep changing' (Schechner 1993: 263).

### **Wholly attending – liminality in public art**

One of the aims of *Holy Hiatus* was to explore whether it was possible for artists to employ ritual to draw audiences into different states of consciousness, to experience liminality or even Turner's *communitas*, which is distinct from liminality in that it is always shared by at

least two people, while liminal experience can be solitary. Why is it important to experience liminality? And why might art be an appropriate vehicle for this? 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 (Alexander 1991: 23).<sup>ii</sup> As Alexander has illustrated in his book *Victor Turner Revisited: Ritual as social change*, Turner proposes that ritual is a response to the division, alienation and exploitation that are associated with everyday social structure. By suspending these structures, ritual may create direct and egalitarian exchanges and invite experimentation with alternative communitarian relations. Ritual is associated with the subjunctive mood, a realm of pure possibility in which experiences generated *could* introduce innovations into the social structure.

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’ (Turner in Alexander 1991: 35) 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’ (Turner in Alexander 1991: 18). It also represents ‘the desire for a total unmediated relationship between person and person...in the very act of realising their commonness’ (Turner in Alexander 1991: 36). It is not an expression of a type of herd instinct, but of humans ‘in their wholeness wholly attending’ (Turner in Alexander 1991: 36). Turner does not deny the need for structure within society, but suggests that our need for *communitas* is just as great.

It is also possible that rituals have a beneficial biological effect. Within the fields of psychology, neurology and biogenetics, research suggests that the ‘oceanic’ feeling of belonging, ecstasy, and total participation that many people experience during rituals works by means of repetitive rhythms, sounds and tones that ‘tune’ the left and right hemispheres of the cerebral cortex to one another (Schechner 1993: 20).<sup>iii</sup> Individual and collective anxieties are relieved by the rhythmic qualities of rituals, stimulating the brain into releasing endorphins into the bloodstream, inducing pleasure and relieving pain (Schechner 1993: 233).<sup>iv</sup> Some researchers suggest that rather than fulfilling a purely cultural need, the desire

to ritualize is hardwired into the human brain. In her book *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, Barbara Ehrenreich speculates that group rituals involving dance may have evolved as a means to create a common emotional bond between people within human communities that were growing in size during the Palaeolithic period, thus making the group more effective at defending themselves from predators and achieving other common aims (Ehrenreich 2007: 23).<sup>v</sup>

*Holy Hiatus* brought together a number of artists who had employed ritual in previous projects to make new works in Cardigan that responded to the themes of ritual, place and community. In the act of making the works, the effect that these would have for audiences was unknown, although it was hoped that something akin to liminality or *communitas* would be accessible for some people some of the time. Turning to the interviewees' answers to the question 'Can you describe what you felt during the artworks?' some interesting responses emerged. Alastair MacLennan's twelve-hour 'actuation' on the footbridge that crosses the River Teifi, generated significant interest. This ranged from simple curiosity to meaningful encounters such as the one experienced by Melanie:

*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.*



While Melanie understood Alastair's performance as 'his' ritual, she still felt drawn into it. Other interviewees felt that more direct participation in a ritual would be necessary to create an inclusive experience; Lowri says 'I'm not sure how successfully [the artworks] could create liminal experiences for people who were not integrally involved in the ritual'. Rebecca illustrates this when she discusses her experience of Buchheim's event. She saw the setting as 'theatrical...it's happening and you're experiencing it but you're not quite involved in it'. She describes how, at the end of the performance, she 'had this real urge...to be in the water, I wanted to be swimming and be involved in it. At the end I just went and put my hand in the water, I wanted to know what the experience was because it felt like the people doing it were doing the ritual, it was an impulse to join it'. She felt that the work was framed in such a way that spontaneous interaction was not invited: 'It was a very specific image being created and that wasn't to be disrupted'. Richard felt that 'the nature of spectacle took over' for him in this event. He says: 'I didn't connect with it...I felt crowded and there was so much going on...it felt difficult to focus and for it all to come together into one experience'.

In contrast, Stuart felt moved by the event at the pool and believed that others there had felt the same way: 'On the way out there was that genuine sense of having shared an experience, I'm not sure everyone would feel the same, but going out, there was eye contact with people and a sense of having been part of something'. This comment would suggest something akin to Turner's *communitas* had taken place at the pool, at least for some of those present. This is supported by Melanie's experience:

*There was a rhythm and a sense of being in the ritual, repeated through the movement of the swimmers...it was a very complete and satisfying experience that was sad in moments. Like the girl in the red dress trying to get away...*

*It brought the audience on a risky journey but it offered a known space that created trust and let us in, allowing us to delve into liminal space. It was sublime...The first time around the words really bothered me; I thought the lyrics were too literal. I thought 'don't tell me what to experience', but then... I got into the chant. The heat was great and the thunder and the rain. People were hushed and shuffling in to see it.*



Maura Hazelden's performance, which took place over a six-hour period, provoked powerful responses. Some of the interviewees equated it to a religious or spiritual experience, heightened by the expansive and vault-like space of the newly built Small World Theatre lit by the evening sun. Lynn said 'It felt like a sort of cathedral. It was a very spiritual, prayerful experience. The voice was so haunting; like a lament'. Richard described the work as having 'a very quiet understated presence in Cardigan, but it had a lot of impact. It was a very calm, thoughtful, meditative piece, which demanded a lot of time'. Euan, who regularly takes part in group meditation, describes how he was quickly drawn into a contemplative space, perhaps akin to the liminal:

*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.*

Rebecca described how the performance stimulated all of the senses, contributing to a whole experience that was profoundly affecting:

*Before we went in we were told to pick up a stone so you immediately had a focus of your attention and it was very minimalist, but there was also a lot to look at because the [space] was strewn with bits of paper and Maura was doing her movement score. And the impulse was just to sit down and stay in one place with it. And it was a meditative thing. The way the singing cut in and out was very effective, very simple.*

*There was smell as well, it was like all your attentions were given some kind of focus...they'd rubbed thyme on the stone, and I was putting it on my face and so I was getting the smell, quite quickly it drew you into a contemplative space, but there was also enough dynamic and change to keep you with it as well.*



With both Buchheim's event at the pool and Hazelden's performance in a theatre space, the distinction between the collective catharsis of theatre and participation in a ritual became blurred, with some attendees perceiving themselves as observers and others as participants. Although there was no obvious invitation to actively participate in Hazelden's performance, Euan and Rebecca felt drawn into the presence of the event. Other interviewees perceived a more definite distinction between performer and audience. Although Richard described the event as 'very moving', he felt that his role was as an observer rather than a participant, and that the venue as a theatre had 'a number of connotations' that meant that he did not 'cross the line between audience member and performer'. Mary felt very aware of the intensity of Maura's focused attention, but she did not feel that she participated in the event:

*As we left...we looked back through one of the windows and saw Maura there and I found that very effecting, to see her through the glass in a space on her own. And on reflection...I felt that we were intruding on her. I know the idea was that we should partake, but I think what I felt was that it was such a personal thing to her that we were almost superfluous to her requirements, she didn't need an audience to do it...she would have done it anyway.*

For Caroline, the repetitive nature of the performance broke through the traditional linear theatre experience because she ‘wasn’t trying to grab the experience like you might do when you go to the theatre where it’s important that you take the whole thing in’. She describes how although there was movement and singing, these contributed to a sense of restfulness: ‘It did affect me afterwards. I felt still and quiet within myself for a length of time and reflective about stillness because there’s not a lot of stillness currently in the world and I kind of crave it. It was very moving’. Caroline describes the process through which, for her, witnessing became an increasingly participatory act as time went by:

*[Maura] was just sort of there doing these strange movements, going through this process of her own. So you’re sort of witnessing her journey in someway, but still reverent in that...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.*

### **Place, community and ritual**

Questions surrounding participation and non-participation that came to the fore in the interviews are highly significant for art projects that take place within the public domain. While galleries can give artists carte blanche to reinvent space imaginatively, without necessarily addressing the particularities of place or community, public art projects tread a much finer line between the aims of the artist and the perception of those intimately connected with a place, sometimes encountering quite voracious public criticism. This has been illustrated in Cardigan following its successful bid to commission a new piece of semi-permanent public art as part of Channel 4’s ‘Big Art Project’. Intense public discussions have taken place between the project’s supporters (who believe that the interactive floating installation on the Teifi by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer will encourage public participation and enhance the newly built Prince Charles Quay, promote tourism and help to develop the growing arts profile of Cardigan) and its detractors, who are concerned about possible environmental impacts, the potential for vandalism and decay of the work, and question the sums of money at stake to achieve its realization. *Holy Hiatus* took place in the midst of

these debates, and it was far from clear at the outset what kind of public reactions would ensue.

The temporary nature of the *Holy Hiatus* events, their relatively low budgets and the ‘playfulness’ that characterized many of the artworks, worked to their advantage in this context. The events left no physical traces, but nonetheless created a buzz of interest that lived on in people’s memories. Ben Stammers, who was invited by Whitehead to follow the dancers and respond to ‘Drift’ with still images, describes how, having lost sight of the performers, he tried to relocate them by asking people if they had seen three people in blue raincoats, and it became clear that the dancers’ activities were prompting spontaneous interactions between curious townspeople:

*Nearly everyone I asked had seen the blue coats, or had heard about them – a smile mostly came to the face in response to my question, usually with a raised eyebrow, and they nearly all had questions for me in return – what was it all about? Was I one of them?*

*Talking to a lady stood in a shop doorway (in English); a group of three people on the main street (in Welsh); and a group of cockney builders, not only allowed me to pick up the trail and eventually catch up with the dancers, but also gave me a real sense of the trace they had left through the town – an undocumented effect that is now left in the perceptions and conversations of the people that glimpsed them or heard about them.*



For some of the interviewees, particular works prompted creative shifts in their thinking about familiar places, Richard says:



*now that I've seen Simon's piece, whenever I walk up and down the High Street in Cardigan, I've got that in mind...I'm just much more aware of moving around the town, I think, but always with him in mind. It's quite humorous, the more I think about it now.*

About Buchheim's event in the swimming pool, Stuart says: 'there was that evocation of a local pool being a place where all sorts might happen, of a spiritual nature and other kinds of things, baptisms and what-have-you...that was an interesting redrawing of the space for me'.

The reciprocal exchange of ideas between artists and audiences or participants is a quality of 'dialogical' public art that Grant Kester promotes in his book *Conversation Pieces*. The facilitation of dialogue (verbal or non-verbal) in public art can 'help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities, official discourse, and the perceived inevitability of partisan political conflict', allowing the art project to 'unfold through a process of performative interaction' (Kester 2004: 8–10). This process-based approach has the potential for viewers' responses to affect the evolution of the artwork and challenges assumptions about the relationships between art, artist, audiences and the wider social and political environment. While it is not strictly speaking an art 'movement', the dialogical approach has characterized some aspects of community orientated and temporary public art since the 1960s, following a growing dissatisfaction with the cultural division of art-spaces and life-spaces. The softening of these boundaries is timely for contemporary practices that explore ritual in public spaces, such as those commissioned for *Holy Hiatus*, since possibilities arise for interaction with ritual activity that is perhaps lacking in other areas of people's lives. Stuart confirms this when he says: 'there is a gap in my life as far as ritual is concerned and I'd probably like to be able to involve myself more'. Lowri also perceived a contemporary diminishment of shared experience during ritual that connected an individual to a community:

*There is a need for social engagement through ritual; a need to share space in an open, humble and vulnerable way. I try to set up opportunities for this to take place and have been fortunate enough to attend some. I perceive that there is a lack of rituals that engage all levels of the community, such as going to chapel did say a hundred years ago, when people shared an experience together no matter what age they were or how different they were in their daily lives.*

Some interviewees who lived in Cardigan felt concerned that audiences who did not have prior knowledge of the *Holy Hiatus* events, or perhaps had little or no experience of this kind of art practice, might feel alienated by the works. Rebecca felt that

*a ritual needs participation and the people involved in that actually need to know what it is and how they are participating and that's what you don't have if it's an art event, you don't actually know what the rules are like you do with a religious ritual or another social kind of ritual.*

It is true that while much temporary public art practice contains an implicit invitation to participate, some people will have the 'cultural capital' to understand this and take up the invitation, while others may not. Similarly, Lowri expressed concern that 'a ritual in which you don't know how to behave, like some of the artworks in *Holy Hiatus*, may be alienating and people may not have attended them for fear of not knowing how to behave'. Despite this unease, Lowri describes how Whitehead's *Drift* 'felt like a joint piece with the town's people', she says that 'everyone was a participant; the bystanders were in full view during the piece and so formed part of it'.

Nia also felt that Whitehead's event was interactive and it was clear that something out of the ordinary was happening, she says: 'I think that even if you hadn't been expecting them that you might have noticed that there was something jaunty about the way they were walking'. She describes how she stayed in one position and observed the dancers 'getting physical with the signposts'. She found the experience really enjoyable and felt that

*they did seem to interact with the public. I can remember seeing one bit when someone walked past them and that seemed to trigger them to carry on, to move further...there was a certain playfulness that was going on amongst them and yet serious as well.*

Perhaps the person that Nia saw was Melanie, who describes how she chose to participate more actively:

*I watched other people ignoring them, and so I decided to set myself a challenge. I walked past them very fast and went around the corner to see how they would respond. When I moved past them, they moved faster. It was very playful.*

Caroline felt that Hazelden's performance invited multilayered interpretation and was interactive with the audience, she says:

*I think there was quite a lot of space in a way to have your feelings and because it was in a building that was enclosed, it was quite private. [Lou] said I looked really serious and she felt that her song was getting quieter and quieter in response to me, which was really interesting because I didn't think she could see me...so it was interactive partly, I was sort of serious and she had to change her song in relation to who was in the room.*

Similarly, Richard felt that MacLennan's twelve-hour performance on the footbridge had a celebratory feel that was also participatory, and this had a lot to do with MacLennan's gentle pace and open body language, which invited interaction, but did not force it upon the passers-by:

*Alastair's was so firmly rooted in the community and in a public space that people couldn't avoid, people had to walk across the bridge to get into Cardigan...you had to experience this thing and you could either bypass it, or you can even talk to him about it, it was very much there and participative...it was temporary, very subtle and jubilant within Cardigan that kind of lifted people a bit and drew attention to the water and to the surrounding area. I thought it worked really well from that point of view...[he was] just being there and doing his thing, he was putting up no barriers, it was 'here I am, I'm doing my thing and come and talk to me about it, we can have a great long chat, I'm here all day'.*

For some of the interviewees who lived in and around Cardigan, the artworks resonated deeply because of their close connection to the town. Nia explained that this was 'one of the reasons I was quite excited about the project...it was a very personal thing to see something happen in my own town that was of interest'. She describes how she saw people interacting with MacLennan on the bridge, and that this experience stayed with her even when she could no longer see him: 'I enjoyed it being there and enjoyed knowing it was there even when I wasn't there and that's because of my relationship to the town'. The relationship between place and ritual is paradoxical. The particularity of place can be a primary stimulus to the development of a ritual, but on the other hand, Turner talks about ritual liminality as 'a place that is not a place'. Is ritual about transporting oneself 'out of

place', to another kind of consciousness, or about gaining a deeper understanding of and relationship to a place? Grimes suggests that perhaps it can be both:

*Ritualists dance...to discover ways of inhabiting a place...ritual helps people figure out, divine, even construct a cosmos. A cosmos is not merely an empty everywhere, it is an everywhere as perceived from somewhere, a universe as construed from a locale. A cosmos is a topocosm, a universe in this place, an oriented, 'cosmosized' place, a this-place which is also an every-where.*

(Grimes 2006: 146)

In his chapter on 'Ritual in Environmental Space' in *Rite out of Place*, Grimes poses a tongue-in-cheek question not normally raised by conventional ritual theory: 'Is ritualizing good for the planet?' He suggests that practitioners and theorists who believe this to be true base their ideas on 'well-grounded but speculative theory' (Grimes 2006: 145). Grimes calls for greater specificity within our understanding of ritual action, suggesting that certain kinds of ritual practices may aid our evolution through enhancing adaptability, but adds that highly structured and rigid ritualized human life can encourage one-dimensional, stereotyped and inflexible identities. Loss of gestural diversity would be damaging to human evolution, so it is important for us to be discriminating about the kinds of rituals in which we partake and those which we choose to forgo. *Holy Hiatus* engaged directly with many big questions about ritual in order to contribute to a process of greater discernment about the nature of contemporary ritual activity, and the role that art can play in this process. A year on, *Holy Hiatus* has spontaneously developed a life of its own, with two of the artists' projects extending beyond the initial events. In conjunction with Safle, Buchheim's performance in the swimming pool has led to an eight-week public audio installation in 2009 titled *Earworms* in which swimmers could hear snippets of audio recordings from her *Song Archive* transmitted through underwater speakers. Hazelden and Laurens have extended their collaborative venture by recreating their performance using recordings from the original event and new live elements in the Small World Theatre on the same date in 2009 and in years to come. This unprompted evolution is what makes temporary public art so

exciting and demonstrates that rituals are always being reinvented to reflect contemporary lived experience.

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<sup>i</sup> Tambiah rejects Bloch's distinction between ritual language (illocutionary) and ordinary day-to-day speech (prepositional), arguing that both styles may appear within a ritual, and in fact a fluid relationship exists between them.

<sup>ii</sup> Mary Douglas argues that the distinction between modern societies and 'primitive' ones is not that ritual is more prominent in the latter, but that primitive societies use ritual to create a self-contained and consistent universe; whereas modern societies use ritual to create sub-worlds that are not as tightly linked because modern societies are far less homogenous.

<sup>iii</sup> Schechner draws on the work of Charles Laughlin and Eugene d'Aquili and colleagues. Ronald L. Grimes (pp. 138–140) scrutinizes these 'biogenetic' theories, and while he is sympathetic to the writers' perspective, he believes that their conclusions about the hardwiring of ritual activity in human consciousness is a generalized and unsubstantiated theory and does not take into account the fact that some cultures emphasize ritual much more than others and that ritual encompasses a huge range of activities. He suggests instead that certain kinds of ritual (predominantly trance and meditation) under certain circumstances can attune both sides of the brain in beneficial ways.

<sup>iv</sup> See also pp. 240 and 256.

<sup>v</sup> Ehrenreich draws on research by Robin Dunbar, who suggests in his book *Gossip, Grooming and the Evolution of Language* that the optimal Palaeolithic group contained around 150 people and that dance, more than speech, bonded these groups at an emotional level.