

CO-DESIGNING RITUALS FOR TRANSITIONAL TIMES

PHD CONSORTIUM

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ABSTRACT

This PhD research proposes to investigate how newly designed community rituals might provide a means of re-conceiving existing carbon-intense lifestyles and help to imagine alternative social futures that move beyond an anthropocentric perspective. By using a combined multi-sensory ethnographic and design approach, this research seeks to understand how ritualistic activity is meaningfully located within everyday life and how it might be possible to work with ritual as a design ‘medium’. Participatory design methods that explore the potential for ritual as a transformational tool within community settings will be developed, in order to create new forms of social interaction and/or systems that help facilitate a collective transition towards a more sustainable future.

INTRODUCTION

As this research is in an early stage, the purpose of this paper is to map out the potential terrain for exploration and critique. This will include a consideration of how rituals could be artificially designed for collective purposes, and what a design mindset might bring to the creation of new rituals. Additionally, this paper will discuss the ways in which participatory design might be considered as a kind of ritual and how this may open up ways of doing design differently. As practice-based research takes place, further insights will be gathered and reflected upon. These threads of exploration and the relevant cross over points will be grounded within the context of design for sustainability / transition design.

The task of transitioning to a more sustainable future necessitates unprecedented change within the domains of everyday life. This involves ‘the total reorganisation’ of existing social formations and practices (Urry 2010, 198). Both top-down and bottom-up socio-technical innovation will be needed in order to shift current unsustainable regimes and routines (Berkhout et al 2003).

Within the emerging discipline of Transition Design, designers are concerned with re-conceiving entire lifestyles to allow for a sustainable future (Irwin, Tonkinwise & Kossoff 2010). Given the complexity of the problems with which they are faced, transition designers are seen as facilitators of emergent solutions, rather than experts that provide blue-printed solutions to clearly identifiable problems. A key component of this role is being able to recognise leverage points for socio-technical change.

Ritual could be a potential leverage point for change. Research currently being conducted by a group of social scientists based at the University of Oslo, points to the important role ritual plays in response to perceived crises. Under the title of *Reassembling Democracy: Ritual as Cultural Resource (REDO)*, the researchers argue that creative responses to crises, triggered by ‘the dynamics of contemporary global transformation’, often involve ‘culturally and religiously informed ritualised actions’ (REDO 2013, 1). Of importance to REDO’s research is the concept of ‘ritual resourcefulness’. They argue that emergent ritualistic activity reveals cultural resources that may have previously been hidden, which once mobilised, can be directed toward shaping the future in new ways. By drawing upon Actor Network Theory, REDO argues that cultural and religious ritual is ‘not only representative of the social’ but integral to its ‘embodied constitution and reconstitution’ (ibid, 2). REDO’s research therefore seeks to investigate ritual as an instrument for social change by studying a range of ritualistic responses, such as the public displays of unity and mourning post the July 22 terrorist attacks in Norway (ibid, 2).

REDO's propositions appear particularly relevant to the emerging field of Transition Design, which is primarily concerned with leveraging change in the face of social and environmental crises. If ritualistic activities actually enable the mobilisation of previously latent cultural resources, then they could possibly be a leverage point for design. In order to explore these ideas further, this paper aims to investigate the intersections between ritual and design, and interrogate what possibilities lie in working with ritual as an instrument for change.

A WORKING DEFINITION

A working definition, that follows REDO's research, is put forward below to progress this discussion further. Rituals are understood as:

Performances which construct, reveal and mobilise pervasive cultural resources capable of contributing to change (REDO 2013, 1).

This definition follows a performative view of ritual, which emphasises lived experience and its emotional significance, as a central focus of study (Light & Petrelli 2014). In this light, rituals can be seen as a performative medium that involves 'human creativity and physicality' (Bell 2009, 73).

Within this understanding of ritual, participants 'construct', 'reveal' and 'mobilise' their own cultural resources through the ritualistic activities that they engage in. Importantly, these performances can also contribute to change and as such, it's possible to begin to see how this definition is relevant to design.

By putting forward a working definition I recognise that it is rife with potentials pitfalls. As Bell observes, anthropologists have often used the study of ritual to make assertions that support their own agendas (Bell, 2009). This unfortunate legacy makes it difficult to discuss ritual theory, as many ritual theories remain contested (as is the case with many social theories). As this PhD is in an early stage and ethnographic research is yet to be conducted, the intention here is not to solidify terms so that they become immovable, or to argue that ritual and design are necessarily the same thing, but rather to allow research to proceed in a cautious way, towards beginning to explore these concepts further.

RITUAL & DESIGN

Ritual has played an important role in social life for many thousands of years, however there is little written on the intersection between ritual and design (Light & Petrelli, 2014). There are a few recent examples of designers who have worked with ritual, yet these explorations appear to be geared toward product or service innovation, rather than an in-depth exploration

of the relationship between ritual and design.

Ritual Design Lab is an initiative, by interaction designers F. Kursat Ozenc, Margaret Hagan, and Defne Civelekoglu, that seeks to investigate the power of ritual to 'build value, meaning & community into our everyday experiences' (Civelekoglu, Hagen & Ozenc 2015). **Figure 1** is a diagram that explains how they situate their work at the intersection of design and ritual.

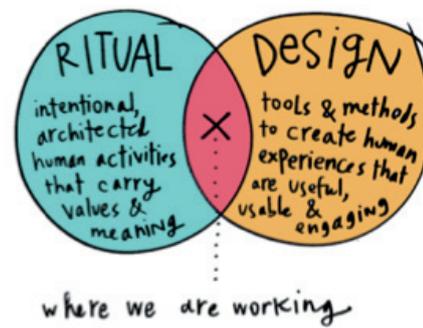


Figure 1. Where We Are Working, Ritual Design Lab

In early 2015, Civelekoglu, Hagen, Ozenc ran a workshop at Stanford d.school, which was designed to offer participants a chance use rituals as a framework to design rich experiences around everyday themes of food, grooming, productivity and commuting.

In addition, the design firm IDEO worked recently with rituals in order to explore and develop hypothetical products and services. Their explorations led to new rituals for child birth (and products associated with it) and rituals for Monday morning to help with 'Mondayitis' (**Figure 2 & 3** respectively).



Figure 2. Ritualistic products to accompany childbirth

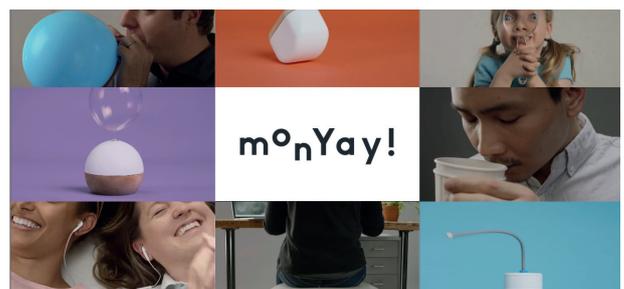


Figure 3. Website featuring rituals for 'Mondayitis'

While these accounts of designers working with ritual provide evidence of the overlap between the two fields, the designs themselves appear to be geared more toward advancing ideas in the service of business than tackling social or environmental problems. As such, it seems that little has been theorised or explored through design practice in order to better understand how ritual could be utilised to mobilise cultural resources.

From a theoretical perspective it might be interesting to investigate the perhaps obvious link between ritual and design, evident in Buchanan’s Four Orders of Design. Buchanan used the words – symbols, things, actions, thoughts – within a framework, to delineate between emerging and ‘traditional’ fields of design (Buchanan 2001). For Buchanan the intersection of action with action, and thought with thought, represented the emerging fields of interaction and environmental design or what he termed the third and fourth order of design (ibid). It would seem that these elements – symbols, things, actions and thoughts – or what Buchanan refers to as ‘placements’, are somewhat integral to ritual practices.

If ritual were to be mapped onto Buchanan’s framework it would fit fairly comfortably within the placement of action and the corresponding intersections of symbols, things and thought (**Figure 4**).

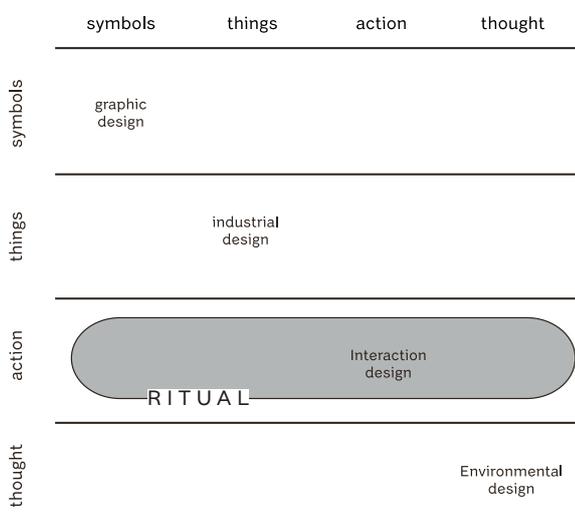


Figure 4 Buchanan’s Four Orders of Design, with ritual design highlighted.

Buchanan’s framework could be one point of reference for practice-based design to further investigate how it might be possible to design engaging ritual-like activities. This could involve working with the placements of symbol, things, actions and thought, to construct meaningful ways for people to participate by

mobilising their cultural resources towards solutions for social and environmental issues.

As this research is seeking to explore ritual in the context of participatory design, let us now turn to look at the ways that ritual offers a possible framework for participation.

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN AND RITUAL

Participatory Design is a practice that is orientated toward the design of socio-material assemblages, rather than the design of singular material artefacts. In their article *Design Things and Design Thinking: Contemporary Participatory Design Challenges*, Bjorgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren argue for a return to the earlier etymology of the word ‘Thing’:

Originally, “Things” go back to the governing assemblies in ancient Nordic and Germanic societies. These pre-Christian Things were assemblies, rituals, and places where disputes were resolved and political decisions made. (Bjorgvinsson, Ehn, Hillgren 2012; 102)

In this definition we can see that a ‘Thing’ was once understood as an assemblage of people, places and matters of concern. According to the authors, these kinds of ‘Things’ can be thought of as ‘socio-material frames for controversies’ that can open up ‘new ways of thinking and behaving’ (Bjorgvinsson, Ehn, Hillgren 2012; 102). By looking at ‘Things’ in this way, it is possible to view ritual as a socio-material frame, that enables controversies to emerge and future making to occur.

Participation in and around design ‘Things’ is becoming a key concern of many designers (Sanders & Stappers 2008). In order to tackle complex social and environmental issues, designers are increasingly taking on the role of a facilitator and developing tools to facilitate other people’s involvement. For Sanders and Stappers, tools that encourage collective creativity are crucial to the development of participatory design approaches. Yet, as Sanders (2013) observes, we know little about how ‘spaces, places, and materials’ contributes to collective creativity (Sanders, 2013). To add to Sanders observation, I would argue that we also need to design effective ways to meet and discuss matters of concern, which are captivating and engaging enough to motivate and sustain participation. As rituals involve space, place, materials within temporal structures, this research asks how ritual-like engagements could support collective creativity.

Brendan Clarke (2006 & 2008) and Joachim Halse (2008) have also explored the relationship between ritual structure and design, albeit in the different way. Clarke and Halse are influenced by the work of Victor

Turner who studied rituals for much of his career as an anthropologist, and contributed significantly to developing theory surrounding rites of passage (Turner 1987). According to Victor Turner, rites of passage are rituals which enable an individual or a group to transition from one state, through a 'liminal stage', and toward a new state or identity (ibid). Rites of passage are a feature of many traditional societies (van Gennep 1960). Young people often undergo a rite of passage or initiation in order to become an accepted part of their community (van Gennep 1909, Turner 1987). This means that the young person must leave behind their childhood – a kind of death – as they transition toward maturity and break with past practices and routines (Turner, 1987). Victor Turner characterised this as three stage process, from separation, through a 'liminal' stage, and then through to reincorporation. Clarke notes the similarity between participatory design processes and rites of passage (Clarke, 2006). He writes:

Participatory Design has always focused on the social transition between the old and the new. For example; the future workshop format of organising group activity seeks to move people from the problems of today to the solutions of tomorrow through a three-stage process of critique, fantasy, and implementation. After the critique (separation), the facilitators (ritual elders) introduce metaphors (symbol-vehicles) to stimulate "what-if" fantasies (liminality). The implementation phase (reincorporation) involves creating a plan for future action. (Clarke, 2006; pp 78)

The 'liminal' phase described here by Clarke, functions as an important frame for possibilities. According to Szakolczai (2015) the experience of liminality can feel like 'being "at the limit"' or 'genuine Alice-in-Wonderland experience, a situation where almost anything can happen' (Szakolczai 2015, 18). Liminality is characterised by 'the experience of 'inbetweenness itself' due to the suspense of 'the weakening and eventual suspension of the ordinary, taken-for-granted structures of life' (ibid, 28). For Clarke and Halse the performance or rehearsal of possible futures within participatory design is akin to the liminal phase in a rite of passage. As such, they argue that through performance, participants are themselves transformed as they act out possible futures.

Practice-based design research offers the opportunity to probe and explore the concept of liminality. In the context of participatory design it appears that liminality is already a helpful concept to analyse and structure phases within design workshops, which recognise what it means for participants to perform possible futures. Following Halse, this research asks how might a better understanding of liminality further enhance the efficacy of participatory design processes?

RITUALS FOR PARTICIPATION

As discussed in the previous section, ritual may offer a means to scaffold or frame processes with participatory design practices. In order to develop this line of argument further I will now turn to a brief discussion of the *Future Library Project*.

The *Future Library Project* is an 'artwork' by artist Katie Paterson. As a project it is difficult to categorise because it plays with our notions of time and value. The project takes place over 100 years. Each year, from the year 2014, an author is commissioned by the library's trust to write a book of any length, which will not be printed or read until the year 2114. As the books are commissioned one by one, a forrest, which was planted in the same year that the project began, quietly grows just outside of Oslo. This forrest of 1000 trees will provide enough paper to print editions of the 100 books in one century's time. Members of the public can purchase a limited edition of the books by buying a certificate, but the books cannot be read until they are printed in 2114. The library itself has already been constructed from the wood that was cleared in order to plant the forest. Printing technologies have been preserved within the library, and the library will hold blank editions of the author's contributions, with only the title showing, so that visitors may come and speculate about the author's contributions.

A series of actions are undertaken to *perform* the *Future Library Project*. Some of these actions include: planting and preserving the forest; writing the books; preserving the manuscripts; commissioning the writers; and purchasing a certificate that entitles one to access the printed copies in the year 2114. Each of these actions is laden with symbolism. The longer time frame seems to give the actions weight and significance. The degree of effort and restraint required to produce the books, meaningfully elevates the practices of planting, preserving, commissioning, and writing to new levels. As a consequence, participation is also elevated and made valuable.

When Margaret Atwood recently handed over her manuscript, which will be the first contribution to the project, she described how she felt like she was donating a kidney. Her expression alludes to the extent to which she feels physically involved in the project. Her participation is of such high value, that she accounts for her contribution as similar to giving away a part of herself.

The Future Library seems to work in a similar way to ritual in that it elevates certain practices by making them symbolic. The project also works across time in order to connect present activities, such as the preservation of the forest, with other times, in which meaningful events will occur – ie. the actions taken to preserve the forest today are linked to the imagined future event of cutting down the forrest to print the books in 2114. Thus the project

appears to charge the present moment with significance and frame mundane activities as meaningful.

While the *Future Library Project* appears to effectively engage and encourage participation it remains somewhat limited, because it is located within a single arts practice. Further to this, it is also difficult to substantiate the positive analysis of the project, in the absence of ethnographic research. However, despite these reservations, the *Future Library Project* offers an opportunity to reflect upon how participation can be meaningfully framed in creative and significant ways.

CONCLUSION

By exploring the intersections between design and ritual I have attempted to show how ritual might be a useful frame or 'construct' to 'reveal' matters of concern surrounding a design project. In tracing the origins of a 'Thing' I explored how participatory design as a contemporary practice may share similar aims as rituals once did in pre-Christian times. And through a discussion of rites of passage I explored the relationship between liminality and processes of participatory design, which act to support future making activities. Finally, through a discussion of the *Future Library* I highlighted how participation could be informed by ritual practices in order to increase and sustain engagement in a design project.

These investigations indicate that ritual offers a poetic and potentially potent language with which to inform design. Rituals involve the participation of people, and their tacit and cultural knowledge of places. And, they involve social relations, processes, systems, artefacts, and symbolic forms of communication extended across time. The expansive reach of ritual provides multiple avenues for a participatory design practice to explore the making of sustainable futures.

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