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BA Fine Art: Studio, Site & Context

Research in Practice (ADAD5004)

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Collective Oddity:

**how can artists use ritual, place and materiality to communicate
meaning and promote collective experience?**

Word count 2692 (excluding title page, abstract, list of figures, footnotes and list of references)

Date: 3rd August 2026

I declare that all the material in this thesis is my own work.

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Abstract

Coming to fine art from a textile background, an appreciation of materiality, especially from a feminist standpoint, was more or less a given. I became interested in ritual and place when I moved to West Wales and discovered that a 1500 year old holy well near my home was still enjoying regular use. I became (and remain) fascinated by the more enigmatic and personal offerings left amongst the more typical scallop shells and Christian prayer cards. Clearly, this place still offers something valuable in way that I can feel but not understand as a person with no faith.

This essay explores ritual as a collective behaviour that shares much with art. Both, according to anthropologist Elena Dissanayake, 'reveal aspects of our collective oddity'. It moves on to a consideration of place as something socially produced and finally looks at the cultural and communicative values of materials and materiality.

This route has enabled me to understand how these phenomena overlap, bringing me to ask the research question: how can artists use ritual, place and materiality to promote collective experience?

Ritual, Place and Materiality

In answer to her own question, 'what is art for?', anthropologist of art and culture Ellen Dissanayake describes art as a behaviour which encompasses both the making and experiencing of art. This behaviour, she suggests, 'reveals aspects of our collective oddity,' (Dissanayake 2022, p. xi). Despite this, Dissanayake argues that because art is a universal human characteristic across all cultures and in all time periods (as far as is currently known), it must do 'something to enhance the survival of species whose members possess that behaviour' (p. 7,9).

Rituals, like art, exist in all societies and, according to Dissanayake, share the same selective value (p. 99). Rituals are 'repetitive, culturally marked as special and often involve magical thinking.' They can be religious or secular and are specific to the society or sub-group in which they are performed. Although ritual can be individual, one of its key functions is fostering social cohesion by connecting each discrete member with the collective experience and shared values of the wider group. (Welsch 2018). Rituals are causally opaque but functional and evidenced in all cultures as coping mechanisms for uncertainty; cognitive scientists have found engaging in ritual to be as objectively effective in managing stress as medication (Xygalatas 2022, p. 81).

Dissanayake argues that ritual often shares form and function with art (Dissanayake 2022, p. 99), and points out that in traditional societies art objects and behaviours are most closely associated with ritual ceremony, with art serving to define ritual objects and actions as 'special'. While ritual generally supports existing social norms and the

collective, art (when independent of the explicitly ritual) leans towards the individual and novel (p. 79-80). However, the essential correspondence between art and ritual is their communicative value,

In fact, both provide a language in which otherwise incommunicable things can be said: images, words, gestures say *more* than their denotive, ordinary meaning...A form is provided for otherwise unruly or diffuse content, and this shape or structure allows the emotional meaning to be conveyed. (Dissanayake 2022, p. 89).

Dissanayake gives several examples of secular contemporary art forms evolving from ritual origins; she identifies Ancient Greek tragedy, which was a vehicle for atonement and catharsis on a societal level, as the forerunner of modern theatre, and Christian liturgy as the root of Western music (p. 80). Walter Benjamin frames this relationship as crucial to the 'aura' of an original work or art, making it clear that 'The 'one-of-a-kind' value of a genuine work of art has its underpinnings in the ritual in which it had its original, initial utility value.' (Benjamin 1936, p. 11).

Writing in 1983, critic and curator Lucy Lippard stated that 'Art making is a ritual, perhaps the most valid – if elitist – one left to this society' and to avoid following organised religion into declining relevance, art should be 'eminently social' (Lippard 1983, p. 159). She observes a self-chosen usage of the term 'rituals' among artists pursuing a more active mode of practice, and correlates this with a preoccupation with relations 'between individual and collective, theory and practice, object and action' (p. 160).

Raising questions about the borrowing of ritual forms and structures from foreign and ancient cultures in a manner which would now be called cultural appropriation, Lippard acknowledges their potential usefulness for personal development but warns that ritual is only authentic when it responds to a collective need and offers a sense of continuity between the past, present and future.

Susan Hiller's practice uses the aesthetic strategies of Conceptualism and Minimalism to examine the persistence of the paranormal, the liminal and the esoteric in popular culture. Although she studied anthropology to PhD level, she rejected what she saw as its artificial construction of a 'participant/observer' division, stating that, "We are all simultaneously participants and observers." (Withers 2004). She created a series of ritual-like group participation works in the 1970s, including *Dream Mapping* (1974).

Hiller invited seven people to join her to collaboratively devise a diagrammatic system of notation for recording their dreams. They then spent three nights sleeping within 'fairy rings' of mushrooms in a Hampshire field, meeting in the mornings to map their dreams individually (see figures 1 and 2 below) before consolidating them into a collective diagram. Hiller 'almost always' works with the cultural materials from her own society (Lange-Berndt 2015, p. 55) and in British folklore, those who sleep within a fairy ring can be transported to fairyland. Hiller sites this within a worldwide belief in the transformative and curative powers of dreams induced by sleeping in 'special' places (Bradley, Brett et al. 1996, p. 35). *Dream Mapping* recalls the local legend that those who sleep on Carn Ingli in the Preseli Hills will awake as either mad or a poet. It also employs the temporal and spatial separation from the everyday that characterises ritual

A black and white photograph showing a woman and a young child lying on their sides on a grassy field. The woman is in the foreground, wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved dress or nightgown. The child is lying next to her, wearing a dark shirt. In the background, there is a wooden fence, a cow standing near the fence, and a barn or farm building. A large tree is visible on the right side of the image. The scene appears to be a rural or farm setting.

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Dream Mapping has been described as a ‘performance without an audience’ (Susan Hiller Org) and Hiller later regretted the lack of inclusivity beyond the original participants (Bradley, Brett et al. 1996, p. 38). However, the dreamers’ notebooks and group notations have been shown in gallery spaces, placed in vitrines and enlarged as wall drawings, widening access somewhat.

For political historian and theorist Anton Jager, one of the fundamental issues affecting contemporary Westernised societies is the loss of direct communal experience following a cultural shift to deinstitutionalisation. Jager demonstrates that this process of disengagement from organised group activities as varied as unions, churches and reading groups accelerated rapidly after 1989, leaving a gap to be filled by looser, fleeting, often globalised online affiliations. These, he argues, do not produce strong social or civic bonds or an authentic sense of belonging (Jager 2026). While Jager directs his theories to explain current political phenomena, could a push-back against social atomisation and a need for the collective also explain the current interest in ritual and folklore in contemporary art and wider society? For London-based Future Ritual, the answer is yes. Founded in 2017 as a curatorial and research practice and now formalised as a community interest company, it explicitly positions performance as ‘a potent, contemporary modality of ritual’ (Joseph Morgan Schofield). Setting itself against the ‘alienation and fragmentation of contemporary life,’ one of Future Ritual’s stated aims is to use experiential and embodied practices as ways of ‘connecting with ourselves, each other and the places we inhabit.’ (Future Ritual) (See figure 3 below).



Figure 3

Archaeologist and anthropologist Christopher Tilley takes a phenomenological approach to place, endorsing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's position that 'the human body provides the fundamental mediation point between thought and the world.' (Tilley 1994, p. 14). Tilley draws a distinction between space in the abstract and humanised space(s) with subjective, relational and temporal contexts. From this thought-provoking perspective, space is a 'medium rather than a container for [human and non-human] action', the specificity of which creates socially produced places with particular character and meaning such as Susan Hiller's field of fairy rings.

Considering the value of narrative in the process of place-making, Tilley explains that 'narratives introduce temporality, making locales markers of individual and group

experiences,' (p. 33) and Palestinian artist Jumana Emil Abboud 'quests for lost stories in the landscape' (Warner 2018, p. 174). Her practice connects oral histories and landscape as a site of memory and creative invention, using folklore, myth and co-created storytelling to draw people together. Much of Abboud's work centres on Palestinian water sources and their traditions, customs and mythologies. In the context of illegal Israeli settlements appropriating and annexing water supplies, hers is a poetic response to conflict and dispossession, exploring identity, power and belonging. (Empire Lines x Artes Mundi 11 2026).

Tilley describes pre-capitalist landscapes as 'invested with mythological understandings and ritual knowledges intimately linked with bodily routines and practices,' (Tilley 1994, p. 22) and Abboud's ongoing interest in water was inspired by *Haunted Springs and Water Demons in Palestine*, a 1922 pamphlet by ethnographer Tawfiq Canaan. (Warner 2018, p. 174). Canaan writes that 'It is an old and widespread belief in all Semitic countries that springs and all running waters are inhabited,' the inhabitants being shape-shifting water spirits, demons and *ghuls who* protect the water source and police its human usage.¹ Marina Warner explains that Canaan's use of folklore and myth to establish continuity with the ancient past of the landscape

¹ Marina Warner notes that 'the functional connection is clear: if you foul a stream by pissing in it – or worse – the demons that haunt it will take revenge.' (p. 177). It is ironic that after a cultural shift from magical thinking to rationalism, the River Wye requires formal, legal prohibitions to discourage pollution. (McKernan 2026)

‘represents efforts to withstand Zionist arguments of ancient occupation and consequent claims to ownership of the land.’ (p. 178) and it is easy to see how this echoes in Abboud’s practice. In an ongoing project, Abboud has sought out the wells recorded by Canaan, sometimes finding landmarks and other material evidence but mostly sites of absence in the landscape and disappearance from contemporary maps of Israel and Palestine. She films these in collaboration with cinematographer Issa Freij or reconjures the ancient spirits of place in fantastical drawings and paintings (Warner 2018, p. 174)

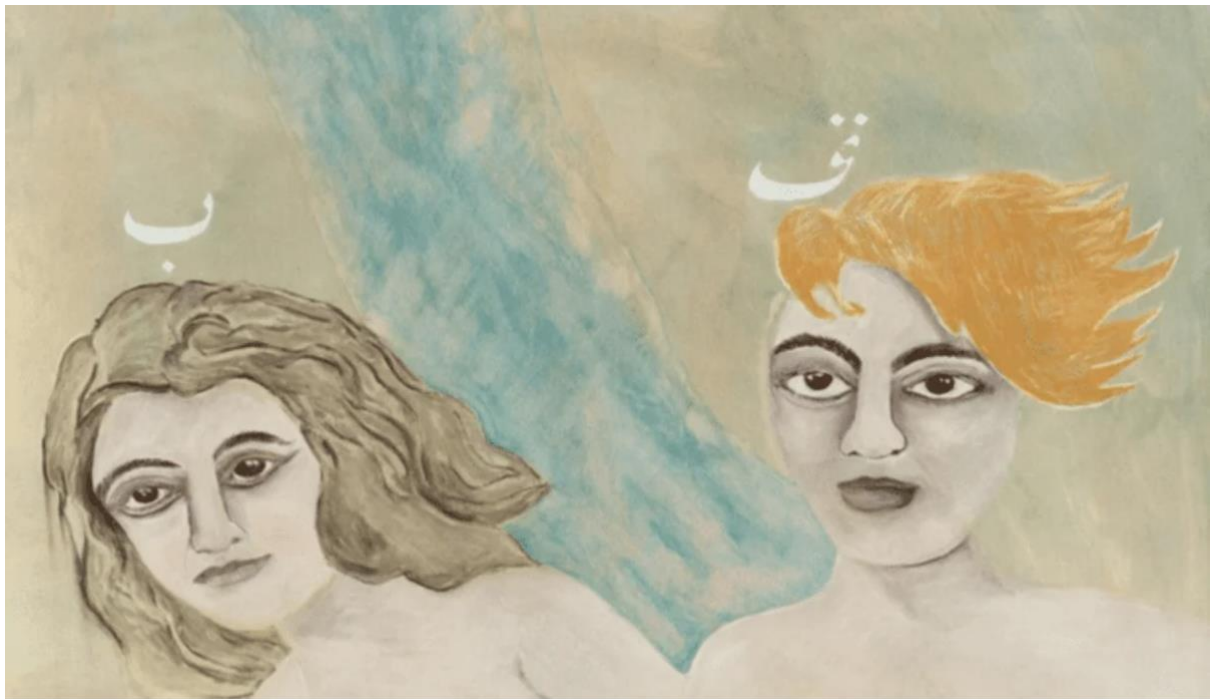


Figure 4

In 2020 Abboud began a project with local women at the spring of Ein Qiniya in the Occupied West Bank of Palestine. Visiting water sources together, (historically, collecting water tended to be a communal and female activity), Abboud and the other participants told traditional stories and co-authored new ones, gathered objects and

made drawings. She explains that aim was to collectively ‘re-open these portals of our imagination to re-story our relationship to the water source.’ (Empire Lines x Artes Mundi 11 2026) Transnational workshops expanded the project, which became *The Water Diviners*, and Abboud brought an iteration to Oriel Mostyn in Llandudno for Artes Mundi 11 in 2025/26. She describes going out into the landscape with local participants, where they visited the holy wells, springs and druidic sites of North Wales, connecting Welsh water culture with the stories she brought from Palestine. Together they wove together fact and fiction, creating multi-voiced stories to be presented at a spoken word performance.

Tilley explains that the mythic and historical value of stories is augmented by having tangible reference points in the landscape (Tilley 1994, p. 32). Alongside the story telling element of *The Water Diviners*, objects that were collected around Ein Qiniya are taken to workshops around the world to be impressed into beeswax coloured with earth from near the spring. They are then “re-spirited” with hand-written charms inspired by the water spirits particular to the locality of the workshop (see figures 5 and 6 below for examples of the charms and an installation view from Oriel Mostyn). These tangible charms embody and anchor a shared heritage of water lore between interconnected peoples (Prince 2026, pp. 9–17).

Bill Brown argues that ‘materiality has achieved a specificity that differentiates it from its superficial cognates such as physicality, reality or concreteness,’ explaining that it acknowledges the ‘aesthetic and semantic’ dimensions of the physical world, where

‘culture, as it is studied and lived, is materially mediated.’ Referring to Robert Friedel’s example of two teapots, one made from blown glass and the other tin, Brown states that ‘it is only by considering the material of each object can we understand the cultural significance of each object (Miller 2013, pp. 189–190).



Figure 5



Figure 6

Regarding Abboud's use of beeswax as a material, this is not merely an eco-friendly option or practical and easily transported choice for workshops. Georges Didi-Huberman delves into the cultural history of wax, beginning with Plato's *The Laws*, in which 'it is the originary wax that might be modelled in the same way as clay by the demiurge' (Lange-Berndt 2015, p. 43). Plato revisits wax in *Theatetus*, this time as a blank wax tablet in a metaphor for memory, asking us to suppose 'that we have in our souls an impregnable wax' that serves to receive our memories. Didi-Huberman then turns to Aristotle who, even more aptly for Abboud, develops the metaphor, proposing that '*memory* has as its object the thing seen *through the image*: it is the impression in the wax that will henceforth serve as the operative model for the sensation itself.'

Abboud's beeswax charms acquire further layers of meaning when understood as part of the same lineage as the 'magical wax Egyptian dolls or figurines of medieval sorcery,'

and ‘votive wax rustic effigies from Cyprus’ that Didi-Huberman lists in a brief survey of 2000 years’ human usage of wax. With purposes ranging from death masks to shop window props, these ‘constitute an extraordinary anthropological sedimentation of this material.’ (Lange-Berndt 2015, p. 45).

Monica Wagner elucidates an ‘idealist tradition’ originating with Plato and Aristotle in which

Material was constantly regarded as the base and counterpoint to artistic creativity, which even in its most precious forms, had to be transcended and transformed by art as activity.’ (Lange-Berndt 2015, p. 27).

Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler demonstrates how this led to the coding of material as feminine and form as masculine (p. 121). Petra Lange-Berndt explains that ‘feminine’ material has also been coded as ‘natural and subaltern,’ while the higher values of culture and intellect are masculine. Summarising, she states that ‘to act with the material and to be complicit means to investigate societal power relations’ (p. 15) and I find this very compelling. In *Towards an Ecology of Materials*, Tim Ingold’s paper surveying the scholarship of material culture, he explains that the outcome of accepting Deleuze and Guattari’s injunction to ‘follow the materials’ in order to truly know them is that:

Production, then, is a process of *correspondence* not in the imposition of pre-conceived form on raw material substance, but the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming. (Ingold 2012, p. 435).

Ingold also discusses the difference between viewing something as an object or a sample of material, stating that to view something as an object is to see it as a 'complete and final form that confronts the viewer, as a *fait accompli*,' but to see something as 'a sample of material, by contrast, is to see it as a *potential* – for further making, growth and transformation.' 'Materials,' he elaborates, 'carry on, overtaking the formal destinations that have been assigned to them.' (Ingold 2012, p. 435). To return to Susan Hiller, she explains that she has been 'explicit about the fact that I use cultural artefacts as basic materials: there is nothing raw or 'natural' about my starting points,' although she denies transforming them, with the following clarification:

The materials that attract me seem to be the ones that have a lot to say, and I collaborate with them to say it...Although I'm aware of the extent to which my work on and with the materials changes them, I feel committed to maintaining the integrity of their origins, as a sign...Art is perhaps an area where the possibility of meaning is framed and collaboratively, collectively determined. (Lange-Berndt 2015, p. 56).

See figure 7 below for Hiller's use of holy water and medicine cabinets in *Emergency Case: Homage to Joseph Beuys* (2012).



Figure 7

To conclude, this essay considered art as a behaviour that has much in common with ritual, looked at places as something socially produced from spaces and explored the cultural meanings of material and materiality. Case studies of works by Susan Hiller and Jumana Emil Abboud, supplemented by a brief review of Future Ritual, explored links between art practice and anthropological, philosophical and political theory. I chose my keywords based on relevance to my current practice but thought of them individually, without considering how they might work in concert. Both Hiller and Abboud's practices could easily illustrate all three categories and Future Ritual fits at least two, revealing a porosity and imbrication of ritual, place and materiality that is very exciting, particularly in terms of communicative and social/collective value.

This leads me to ask the question: how can artists use ritual, place and materiality to promote collective experience?

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