

Ritual & Ritual Objects



*'Ritual actions do not produce a practical result on the external world—that is one of the reasons why we call them ritual. But to make this statement is not to say that ritual has no function . . . it gives members of the society confidence, it dispels their anxieties, and it disciplines their social organizations.'* (Homans, 1941)

One of the greatest effects of making a plantstallation, is that it provides a confidence boost through artistic expression, while at the same time it can reduce stress and anxiety by bringing you into nature. The act of heading out in groups to forage for plants and experience trees up close, builds the sense of community and helps to organise social relationships.

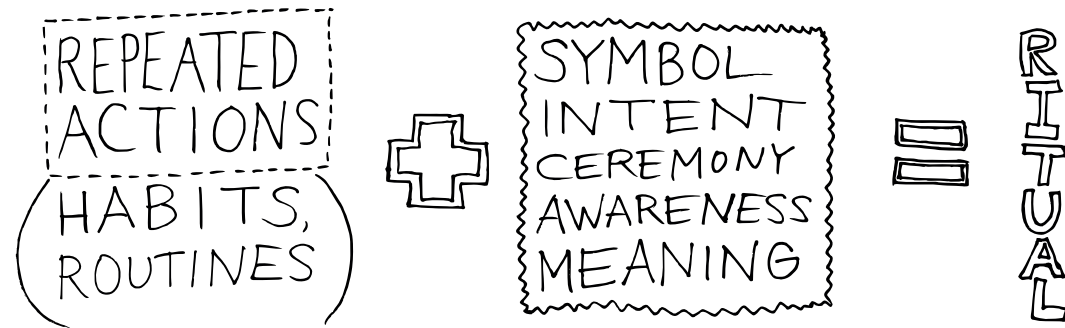
Ritualistic acts are often repetitive, being practiced over and over until there is connection between the mind, body, and even spirit. It involves the body; rituals can be as corporeal as precise choreographed movements, taking a bath, cleaning the house, or pulling the branches of a tree toward yourself. It is clear that intention is also an essential trait of rituals. A person might want to reduce anxiety, lighten their grief, or increase the chances of performing well in a competition of some kind. Whatever the desired result might be, people engage in rituals for a wide variety of reasons.

These three qualities leave the space necessary for ritual to be designed. Repetition, the body, and the intention, are all parameters that need to be defined by the specifics of a given ritual (Gino and Norton, 2013).

So, how might creating a ritual by design work in practice? As you head to a forest or park to forage plant cuttings, you move your body through the natural environment and navigate through obstacles. There is certainly repetition involved in the plantstallation practice too, because they can be created in any season and in any place where something grows naturally. It is based on the plants that have grown in the country for thousands of years, so you'll need to choose locations where native plant species are very likely to be growing. A nature reserve with old trees is a great place to forage, or a park with plants that would have also grown there before it was a park. The intention is clearly found in the process of choosing species and specific objects that will be used. These items will have subjective and/or historical meaning to you, and the act of arranging these things in a certain way is 100% intention. Both design and ritual fulfill roles in everyone's lives, and we can see from the descriptions above that they share some common ground as well.

## HOW DOES A RITUAL OPERATE?

By engaging in ritualistic acts whilst making plantstallations, we can help shape our identity. Rituals can help us connect with the past, maintain cultural identity, support family values, and promote healing and wellbeing (Wakefield, 2006). The way in which ritual operates can be conceived as “a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership” (Collins, 2004). When people join a plantstallation workshop, they are working with the same aims of foraging for plants and building plantstallations. This activity becomes a shared experience when participating in a group, which creates a sense of belonging to a particular community. Whether they concern cultural traditions, sacred religious practices, nonmedical wellness practices, or socially engaged arts, rituals all operate with the same function to situate a person in their community, whatever that may be.



## VALUE OF RITUAL

Rituals normally include some of the following values: community, awareness, intentionality, and spirituality (Nelson-Becker and Sangster, 2018). Ritual can create a feeling of connection, or a feeling of community, if we practice a ritual that has a history or that others practice currently. Many rituals create a sense of community: daily exercise, brewing tea or coffee, and making plantstallations. Experiencing nature and observing the various plant species with other people allows us to feel beyond ourselves and become part of something larger - a group of people engaged in the same activity. Awareness and intentionality is what defines ritual as being different from habits or routines; rituals create the sensation that something important or special is occurring, a feeling of excitement ensues and the level of awareness goes up. In the process of creating a plantstallation, your senses will become heightened. The scents in the park or forest will be more aromatic, the greens and blues more vibrant, and the sounds of wildlife, playing children, and even distant traffic will become more detailed. This heightened awareness can actually bring you to a higher level of consciousness through either bodily movement (repetitive actions), or mindful meditation, for example (Biswas-Diener and Teeny, 2015). Making a plantstallation can be a spiritual experience as well, where rationale and hard facts are not necessarily as important as gut-instinct and making creative choices.

**Value of Ritual:**  
Reflection, Affirmation  
Community, Connection  
Behaviour-change, Follow-through  
Lightening, Freshening, Purification  
Charging, Strengthening  
Enlightenment, Meaning, "Higherness"

It is not about simply believing that performing a ritual, like making a plantstallation, is good for your health. Research shows that rituals are effective in reducing stress or anxiety, and can also alleviate feelings of grief and loss. According to some recent investigations by psychologists, 'rituals can have a causal impact on people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours' (Gino and Norton, 2013). It's becoming clear that the power, and therefore the value, of ritual can be observed in how ritualistic acts affect the outcomes of things like important meetings, performances, dealing with grief, and more. Perhaps the ritual of making your plantstallation can help you through an emotionally difficult time, provide some stress-reduction before a big event, or simply give you a meditative break from your busy daily life.

**ALL OBJECTS ARE RITUALISTIC**

As you consider objects to use in combination with your plant selection, it is important to remember that they are part of the ritual act too. Because of their material composition, and being uniquely situated within our culture, objects inherently carry ritual in them. Whatever their specific purpose is, they are active in supporting our aim to find balance in our lives. Objects can be held, interacted with, and we can even attach them to our bodies in some fashion. By choosing to use them, wear them, own them, objects carry purpose. They remind us of our own values when we pay attention to the ideals that they represent. *Muñeca quitapena*, or worry dolls, are wonderful examples of a ritualistic object. They are small, hand-made figures that originate in Guatemala, and when children (or adults) are facing a problem or a worry in their lives, a worry doll may be given to them to make things easier. The child speaks to the doll and explains the problem, placing the doll under their pillow before falling asleep at night. In the morning, the doll will offer the wisdom and knowledge to deal with the problem they're facing, ridding themselves of the worry. (FAME, 2021)



*"An object awakens our love just because it seems to be the bearer of powers that are greater than itself." (Jung, 1964)*

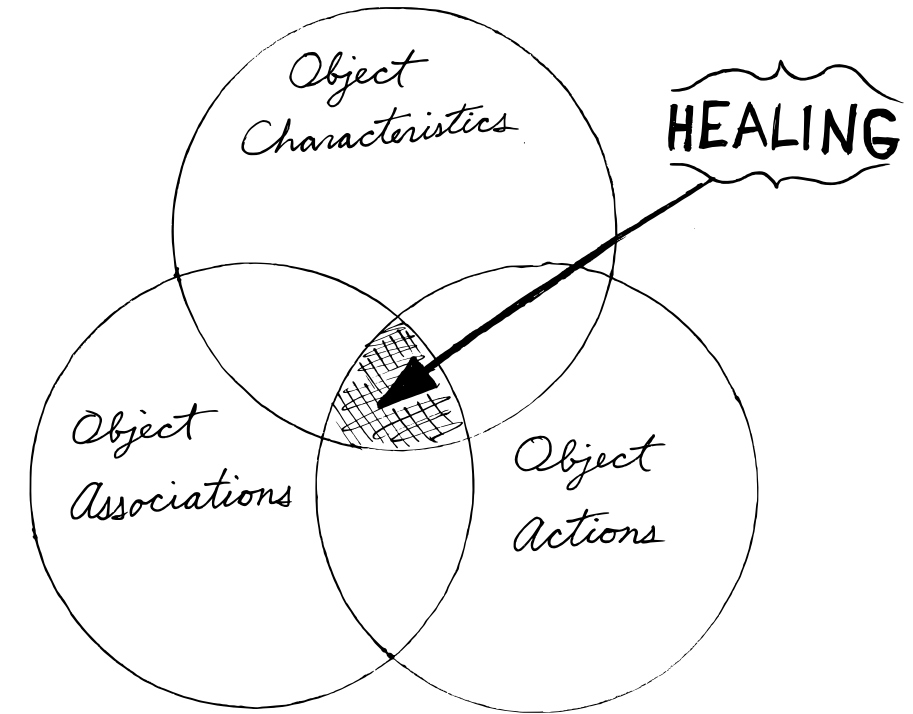
Much like the goal of design, ritualistic objects influence people's lives, making them better. Designers don't need to make up rituals to go with an object, because qualities of ritual are already embedded within: objects, 'have a relationship with us, carrying the potential to be mediated through ritual' (Bell, 1997). You can use this to your benefit when choosing which items to incorporate in your plantstallation. The existing ritualism of objects can be enhanced in the choice of plants carrying a meaning or symbolism that enhances an object's inherent ritualism. For example, the elm is a symbol for communication. You might decide to put that in combination with a mobile phone which is used to perform the ritual of connecting with, perhaps, a good friend, parents, or a mentor. The symbolism added by the elm tree reinforces the meaning of communication and, therefore, enhances the communication characteristic within the mobile phone.

When I consider how I might approach designing a ritual object for a socially engaged artwork, I imagine it needs to be an open process; a dialog with object-users to gain insights about how an object is or could be used in a ritualistic way. I cannot assign a ritualistic significance to an object, I must observe the ritual that comes out of the relationship between object and user.

Dr. Ross Laird makes a connection between, 'objects in the hand and the path of personal healing' (Laird, n.d.). Objects act as guides or symbols: they can either challenge or motivate us to overcome something. Because each object is unique, they will always have a different meaning and different interaction with each person that comes into contact with them. Thus, their healing power is something subjective, it varies according to the user, the owner, or the visitor. In museums, for example, it may not be, 'in the hand,' but objects kept on display come into contact with countless visitors. The individual will have a unique experience of the embodied past carried forward by each object. How the healing power of an object becomes activated will depend entirely on the relationship between visitor and object: the associated memories, the symbolism within the object, and even a person's experiences on the day. The histories, memories, and the subjective healing power are characteristics to be considered when selecting the objects or materials for your plantstallation.

*Dynamic interplay of object characteristics, associations, and actions*  
(Cowan, Laird and Mckeown, 2020)

Brenda Cowan developed a theory about the human-object-health connection based on her career spent examining the power of objects in museums. Her theory of Psychotherapeutic Object Dynamics, 'identifies common and universal actions, associations, and evocative experiences that people have with objects' (Jennings, n.d.), and links these to health and wellbeing. The theory investigates common connections that humans have with objects. It could be the way that an object is collected, the act of giving away objects or the making of something that has a specific purpose. These activities are perhaps unremarkable, but they describe the dynamics between humans and objects that define the theory. These basic actions directly relating to objects arguably influence overall wellbeing.



These dynamics that we infer in healing objects are inherently therapeutic, and occur in both everyday life and therapeutic settings. In Cowan's theory, she lists the specific dynamics: associating, composing, giving/receiving, making, releasing/unburdening, synergizing, and touching (Cowan, Laird and Mckeown, 2020). Below, I've summarised my understanding of the object dynamics Cowan includes in the theory:

- **ASSOCIATING** is the action of keeping close to an object with the goal of maintaining knowledge and memory of an object's associations. This could be things like experience, modes of being, places or people. Associating is the most common of the object dynamics.
- **COMPOSING** is the act of using objects and arranging them/linking them in such a way that they can help to express an idea or concept. Composing allows us to get across a meaning that might not be fully understood otherwise.
- **GIVING/RECEIVING** is related to the act of giving away an object with the intention that it's accepted by another person. Both parties understand that the object is passed from one to another with the attributed meaning included.
- **MAKING** occurs when an original or new object is created, and the maker experiences the fundamental creative process.
- **RELEASING/UNBURDENING** refers to removing an object from its former association and passing it to another - it associates with the giving of objects.
- **SYNERGIZING** is putting an object into a collective setting which creates a new meaning that is larger than any of the individual objects or components.
- **TOUCHING** is simply touching an object consciously or unconsciously while talking about or thinking about that object. It could also refer to the concept of touching an object: this can be actual touching or it can be a kind of tactile memory.

While it may not be something that you actively pursue, or are even consciously aware of, all of the object dynamics listed above determine how you relate to the objects that are involved in the process of creating plantstallations. These dynamics give strength to this socially engaged art practice.

Ritual objects feature more in our lives than we might realise, from their use in daily practices to annual traditions that denote significant events. Ritual provides some important functions that shape our identity, which helps us understand our place in the world. It can be a good way to express our emotions or process events, rituals offer us stability, and can solidify our membership within a certain community. It can also serve as a moment of transition; a doorway that we must pass through to enter a new chapter in our life. Perhaps most important to the *plantstallation* practice is the ability of ritual to provide emotional support and boost your self confidence.



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