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Opinion

RITUAL SPACES Putting Art in its Political Space (A Response to Dorothea von Hantelmann)

by Jeremy Reid (*Published on January 04, 2020*)



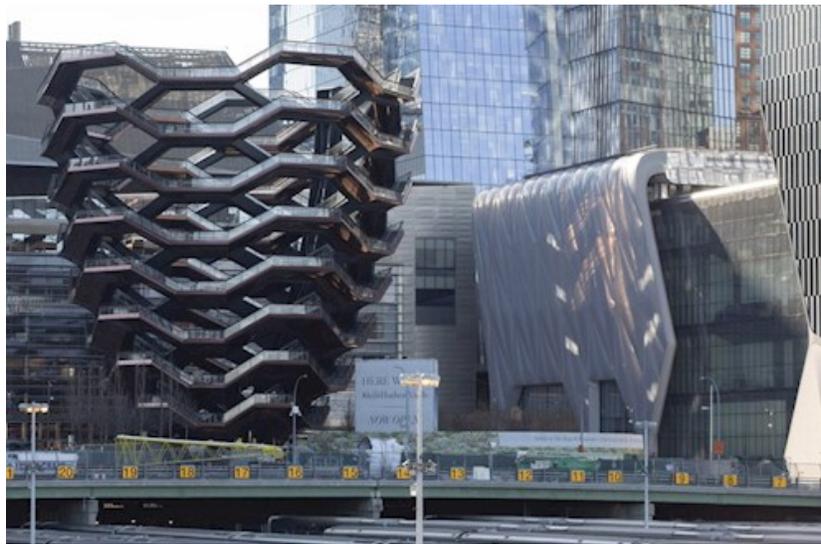
Jeremy Reid was recently appointed Assistant Professor at San Francisco State University, Department of Philosophy. He earned his Ph.D. at the University of Arizona and grew up in Auckland, New Zealand, where his undergraduate studies embraced philosophy, musicology and the classical languages.

Must it all be either less or more
 Either plain or grand?
 Is it always 'or'?
 Is it never 'and'?

Stephen Sondheim, *Into the Woods*

The Shed is the latest addition to New York City's arts scene. It is a massive, moveable, box-like venue for concerts, galleries and plays alike. But, really, it's designed for none of these: The Shed is a multimedia, cross-platform and dynamic space where artists are not confined by the conventions – physical, social and conceptual – of the concert hall or museum. As is written on a wall within the building and displayed prominently online, 'The Shed commissions original works of art, across all disciplines, for all audiences'. Clearly, this is a place intended to break down Foucauldian power structures and to synthesize Hegelian antitheses – an impression emphasized by the volumes of Hegel and Foucault looming nearby in the carefully curated lobby bookstore.

We'll come back to German Idealism in a moment, but it's worth saying a little more about the facts on the ground. The Shed cost over \$500 million to build and is situated in what can only be described as the astonishingly bougie Hudson Yards district in Manhattan. Next to The Shed is The Vessel (hint: watch for definite articles throughout), a brass beehive staircase sculpture for which I had to acquire a ticket and queue for nearly an hour to walk up. Though The Vessel doesn't promise impressive views, it is delightfully shiny and has quickly become an iconic selfie spot. Next to The Shed and The Vessel is a huge shopping mall, perhaps unremarkable given that this is America, but remember this is also Manhattan, where you pay for extra square feet of space with double shifts at your third job. And all around the mall, as we might have predicted, are new apartment buildings, edgy enough to look modern and chic but also plainly inoffensive: one building is called The Ohm – for those in the resistance or for those who like yoga?



The Vessel and The Shed

With this geography in mind, it's easy to understand why the team behind The Shed felt the need to say something to justify its existence. And so along with the public premiere came a 20-page manifesto by Dorothea von Hantelmann, Professor of Art and Society at the Freie Universität Berlin, entitled *What is the New Ritual Space for the 21st Century* (<https://theshed.org/program/series/2-a-prelude-to-the-shed/new-ritual-space-21st-century>)? Leaving aside the question of how well a theory-laden treatise (one that took this professional philosopher the better part of a three-hour train-ride to read) answers to the concerns of the average New Yorker, von Hantelmann's basic thesis is this: art establishments such as the theatre, gallery and concert hall traditionally responded to the social needs of audiences at particular historical times; our new social needs call for a new kind of art and thus a new kind of artistic space.

Rituals, in von Hantelmann's framework, are privileged social norms that manifest and reinforce the values of a society through repeated collective experience. Because different societies have different collective values, the primary rituals and ritual spaces are determined by the historical and cultural epoch. In rural communities, rituals can arise quickly and easily because congregation happens organically in small groups. But once that group becomes the size of a city, special places are needed in which the community can congregate as one. Von Hantelmann's two paradigm examples are the amphitheatre in ancient Greece (specifically, the performance of tragedies at the City Dionysia in Athens) and the cathedral in medieval Europe. These locations, which could house tens of thousands of people, were places where residents could take part in artistic and religious experiences as one collective body; they represented a shared location in time and space, and thus embodied a shared value system.

But the increasing size of the modern metropolis and the rise of democratic liberal individualism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries prompted the need for a new kind of ritual space, one where participants shared the same physical location but enjoyed a more isolated and subjective experience. Rather than engaging in a collective gathering where everybody views or hears the same thing at the same time (in von Hantelmann's terminology, 'the modality of appointment'), visitors to the art gallery or museum participated in an individualized gathering, moving freely through the space as they pleased and spending their time contemplating whatever most interested them ('the modality of opening hours'). The new artistic space thus catered not only to the physical demands of increased population – many more people could go through a gallery in a day than could attend a concert – but also to the defining values of the historical epoch. In a nutshell, galleries and exhibitions foster an individualistic experience, while concert halls and theaters are primarily collectivist.

Of course, history and society march on: according to von Hantelmann, we are now 'positioned before a transition that can be described as the threshold of a cosmopolitan consciousness', and, as a result, we share a need for 'actual physical places where individuals recognize themselves as members of a nascent global society'. In other words, democratic liberal individualism left us lonely, isolated and yearning for a sense of belonging and family; so, now into the twenty-first century, art and art spaces are learning to synthesize the shared communal experiences of the earlier epoch with the hard-won personal autonomy of liberalism. Von Hantelmann writes: 'The question that increasingly concerns us is how the dualisms on which the modern order is based – society and nature, spirit and

matter, theory and practice – can be overcome; how everything that has been separated – nature from culture, product from process, the individual from social ties, rationality from other modalities of knowledge and consciousness, and the like – can be connected. The objective has become to find ways to think in terms of modalities of association and interrelatedness rather than modalities of separation and further liberalization.' (Here's the inevitable return to Hegel.) 'The core question', she writes, is: 'How to create a format that temporarily brings people together in non-rigid ways, that introduces moments of connectivity without falling back on inherited and calcified conceptions of the collective?'

Given this new cultural paradigm, von Hantelmann argues that new artistic spaces need to satisfy three criteria. First, to overcome the primacy of the visual, engaging all of the senses and perceptual faculties so as to address 'the whole being'; second, to offer opening hours so that people can move through the space as individuals, but share artistic experiences; third, to feature a transformative topology, a space that moves and changes according to the needs of the artists and audiences, so that the formats and modalities of interaction are in flux as the day unfolds.

The space that can do this, presumably (though von Hantelmann does not say as much) is The Shed. Is this a *new* ritual space though?

Von Hantelmann mentions the Centre Pompidou in Paris as a possible forerunner, and many galleries also have performance spaces for music concerts or theatrical productions. In fact, all of the main performance venues of the assorted places I have lived (the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, the Tucson Convention Center in Arizona, and the Aotea Centre in Auckland, New Zealand) host a wide variety of artistic productions across different media on any given day. It is also worth pointing out that perhaps the most vivid examples of this individualized but collective ritual space are offered by the Las Vegas casinos, where you can see a Monet exhibition, attend a Cirque du Soleil show, hear jazz or J-Lo, go to a TED talk, gamble, eat, drink, sleep, shop and rave in the same building. Is The Shed an especially versatile and technologically impressive multimedia art space? Absolutely. But note that this is a difference of degree and not of kind.



Bellagio Hotel and Casino, Las Vegas (above); the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art (below), which featured in the 2001 film *Ocean's Eleven* (dir. Steven Soderbergh)



Also curious, I think, is the justification von Hantelmann provides for these new ritual spaces and the assumption of value that lies beneath her claim: that is, what counts as art, good art, and as a good art space. Put simply, her story, unashamedly teleological, relies on a particular reading of history and politics that may well be false. Teleological accounts of art and society imply that ‘we’ have ‘needs’ now and that anything that doesn’t cater to these ‘needs’ is outdated or likely to be unsatisfying to ‘us’. But who is the ‘we’ here and what are these ‘needs’? Must art cater to universally shared needs? While the increasing diversity of artistic media is exciting and creates untold possibilities for new aesthetic genres and experiences, it is a surely a mistake to think that older forms of artistic expression have somehow lost their power or speak only to the spirit of times past. Teleology implies progress, and progress implies a better and a worse. Yet, say, concert music, art galleries and novels for reading tucked away at home are all doing just fine, even though these media do not strike the delicate balance between liberal individualism and collective activity that von Hantelmann advocates.

So, for one, it’s not obvious that art and art spaces failing to satisfy the aforementioned desiderata are necessarily going to be unsuccessful – both in commercial and cultural-aesthetic terms. Moreover, it’s unclear why art itself should be laden with the cultural burdens that von Hantelmann identifies. While it is true that art has an important part to play in the story of a society and its central rituals, the values of that society are just as much revealed in far less lofty pursuits. Consider von Hantelmann’s example of ancient Greece. Is the theater *the* ritual space for this society? What about the temple of Athena on the acropolis, the Pnyx where the popular assembly met to vote and run the city, the gymnasias, the Academy, the military training grounds, the agora, the houses where people met for symposia, the brothels, the taverns, the courthouses, the shared mess halls for meals? Plato and Aristotle certainly thought that each of these places had an important part to play in shaping the culture of the city (some for better, others for worse). So it’s worth considering whether specifically artistic rituals have a more significant social role to play than these other rituals and whether Vegas casinos may be more culturally indicative than we are prepared to admit.



The view of the acropolis from the Pnyx, Athens

But is it not significant that artistic rituals such as those in the theatre and cathedral happen in spaces of collective *gathering*? Von Hantelmann started her essay by emphasizing the problems of population size and collective identity, and how these problems are solved by particular massive spaces. Presumably her thought is that the physical proximity of people has a particular role to play in fostering shared cultural identity. Many people in one space, however, does not a collective make. I recall a story from a religious scholar about her first visit to the site of the great temple in Jerusalem (a symbol of collective identity if ever there were one). Earlier in her career, she had emphasized the political significance of the episode in all four gospels where Jesus of Nazareth overturned the tables of money-lenders. But in person, struck by the sheer size of the courtyard, the number of people packed in and the overwhelming noise, she suddenly revised her views about the event – *because nobody would have noticed it*. One of my dissertation supervisors had a similar about-face when, during a visit to the Greek capital, she was struck by how bad the acoustics were at the Pnyx and the implications of this for the prospects of rhetoric and collective deliberation in democratic Athens. So are the large numbers of people gathered in these spaces *unified collectives*, or merely crowds?

While shared spaces can sometimes lead to shared experiences and foster or express shared values, we should be careful not to over-romanticize. In a building as big as The Shed, it's hard to see why it's significant that, while one person is at an exhibition on the fourth floor, another sees a show on the second floor. The two share a roof, but nothing follows from this. If anything, what unifies them are their shared interests, and interests are much more diverse and dispersed than spaces. So why should this large art space be the privileged locus for forging their social identity, rather than, say, the gay leather bar a stone's throw south that they both go to afterwards?

The problem at the heart of von Hantelmann's account is the old story about how we once had cohesive communities of shared values, but then we became isolated individuals, and now we need to find the best of both conditions. I cannot speak to other disciplines, but in political philosophy this narrative played out a few decades ago between the so-called Communitarians and the Liberals. In brief, Communitarians accused Liberals of being context-free individualists who failed to account for our embedded social identities, while Liberals accused Communitarians of parochialism and a veiled authoritarianism that failed to account for individual autonomy. The debate fizzled out: Liberals realized that shared values and norms were needed within a democratic society for it to function and remain stable; and Communitarians realized that there was no clear way to demarcate the cultures and identities within a society. As a result, both schools started theorizing about how we could allow for diverse ways of life grounded in frameworks of values that we could share. (All the while historians quietly pointed out that there have always been political struggles on the basis of wealth, race, class, justice, religion and culture, so it's unclear whether we ever had cohesive communities of shared values at all or whether there was a point at which we abandoned these identities in the individualism of the Enlightenment.) In other words, political philosophers stopped talking about whether a society focuses on the collective or the individual, and instead started talking about how political order can arise from social complexity.

What does this have to do art, its aesthetic qualities and associated modes of spectatorship? Well, once we stop thinking about 'society's needs' as though this were a single thing, we realize that art (along with our other cultural rituals) does many different things for many different people, and it is a mistake to think that 'the art for our

time' must satisfy a single specified telos or set of checkboxes, or that particular artforms ever did anything of the sort. And it's here, I think, that the programming at the Shed has done a better job than the theory behind it. The performance I saw back in June last year was of a sound poem by Kelsey Pyro called *Makadewiiaasikwe*. It made use of mixed media, but nothing that couldn't be achieved in someone's house with a projector and a decent set of power outlets. *Makadewiiaasikwe* explored Pyro's own struggles of identity as a woman whose father was a black Puerto Rican and whose mother was half-white and half-Ojibwe. Pyro didn't fit into any pre-packaged racial or cultural boxes, and yet aspects of her heritage formed important parts of her identity. The sound poem focused especially on ways of dealing with grief, loss and historical injustices, juxtaposing Pyro's own experience with the book she was recommended by her therapist, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *Five Stages of Grief* – a book that did not explain how to deal with 700 years of inherited grief.

Pyro's piece was brutally honest, provocative, and deliberately alienating. (Three middle-aged white women walked out of the intimate theater halfway through the performance I attended.) But *Makadewiiaasikwe* was effective and compelling not because it manifested something of the general Zeitgeist, but because it conveyed matters deeply personal to Pyro in a way that audience members could relate to or be challenged by. It wouldn't have been a more nuanced artistic experience if it used more media platforms or if it had been paired with a tasteful exhibition of sculptures in the adjacent hall: it was sufficient on its own. And, arguably, it would still function as effectively had it been performed at a community theater in the Bronx or the suburbs of Minneapolis. (In fact, it might even have been better, for Pyro was clearly fighting against the norms of 'the modality of appointment' that high art institutions have cultivated so strongly).

The issue with von Hantelmann's teleological theorizing is both simple and familiar: it puts the cart before the horse. By presupposing a set of needs and a correlate set of goals for art and for art spaces, we also presuppose a set of criteria that 'good' art – art that reflects who we really are, art that is truly contemporary, art that deserves to be publically funded – should have. But, instead, we should be asking artists what *they* need to make art and then assess that work on its own merits. Some artists will surely have grand visions that only a place like The Shed could cater to, but every artist knows that they can't make a living creating pieces that could only be performed at a \$500 million venue in midtown Manhattan. Thus, despite The Shed's pioneering and laudably diverse programming, I share the worries of other commentators who have raised an eyebrow at the justification for this space, given that many other performance spaces and art programs elsewhere in New York and in the country are struggling to get by.

So what is the ritual space of the twenty-first century? Why think there is *one*? We have diverse social and cultural needs, and diverse ritual spaces to cater to them – malls, gay bars, stadiums, universities, mosques, art galleries and so forth. For some, artistic institutions will play a central role in fostering their identities (as individuals and as a community); but others will likely look elsewhere. Artists may or may not choose to experiment with new media, finding new ways to use new spaces. Some of their experiments will resonate with a broad cross-section of society, and some will speak to only a few. So with respect to the artforms and art spaces we need now, at this cultural moment, we might follow Sondheim (would he have found a home at The Shed?): sometimes it's an 'or' and sometimes it's an 'and'; sometimes it's plain and sometimes it's grand.

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