

Showing Up: A Creative Reflection on Ritualization for Art Educators

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ABSTRACT

This creative reflection looks thoughtfully at the act of ritualization as a potential pedagogical tool towards letting go of more outcome-based processes and releasing predetermined expectations. Stemming from the authors repeated actions of showing up to the canvas daily, this visual essay explores the possibility that ritualization may resituate the self and allow for new understandings to present themselves in an emergent way. Using personal experience as the starting point, the essay asks how ritualizing the act of art-making without predetermined outcomes, may impact art educators and their practice.

KEYWORDS: Ritualization, art education, pedagogy, emergence, repetition

Ritualization, as a repeated act that informs one's understanding of the world and a fluid process of structuring a world of meaning for oneself, is continuous—it is dynamic and informative, educational and reflective (Grimes, 2000). For the artist and arguably art educator, ritualization is the act of showing up; it is the 'coming to' of your own creative and learning spaces again and again, not to produce a product but to hold oneself accountable to the emergent possibilities presented through this form of structuring. Specifically, this visual essay points to the importance of ritualizing the act of art-making for art educators, not as a process of sacred and well-defined actions or rituals, but as a means toward letting go of outcome-based practices. As Grimes (2013) writes "Ritualizing action, though it may have as a goal the production of a stable rite, must at the same time let go of goal-orientedness, pronounced intentionalities" (p. 57). As both an art educator and artist, this is an important distinction. Coming to a space with the intention of releasing intentions, as strange as that may sound, holds the potential to engage in not-yet-anticipated ways of knowing and not-yet-determined encounters with self and other. In this way, ritualization becomes a structuring element for engaging in active and often performative inquiry and learning that has the potential to resituate the self or understanding of self within a larger context of people, materials, and practices (Bickel, 2020). Through my own work, I have found this to be true—the ritualization of the art making created a structured container, allowing me to both turn inward and expand at the same time, to rethink the intra-relations between the self and other as well as consider the pedagogical impact of moving and making in this way.

The images and text below are a result of daily engagements with the canvas for limited periods of time along with daily written reflections on the creative process. During this designated time and space, I engaged in art-making with very few pre-formed parameters or expectations except to show up, engage in the creative process, document changes, and reflect. This way of entering into the creative space, in an open-ended manner, allowed me to greet the unexpected and be open to what presented itself through repeated material engagements. The work was not pre-determined, but rather arose through the process of meandering about or what I call muddling in a very embodied manner.

As time went on, and I continued to show up, there was a ritualization that began to occur. The practice of getting the body, mind, and materials ready as I entered the creative space became ritualized itself—changing clothes, removing all jewelry, taking off my shoes, feeling the cold floor on my feet, stepping onto the tarp, getting quiet, standing in silence with materials before I began—the ritualization of these actions created a structure that allowed me to let go, to be present, to face the potentials that were unknown. As such, questions also began to form. I started to inquire about the repetitive act and why this dedicated time and space might be important for art educators. I wondered how this embodied sort of coming to, showing up again and again, without ‘knowing’ in advance, might affect pedagogical encounters or ways of being. I started to ask how might the ritualization of this making/creative practice be related to pedagogical approaches, and how might these relations further express themselves through teaching? All of these large and very deeply entangled lines of inquiry began to present themselves as the painting seen here (Figures 1 through Figure 6) was created and the words were written on the page.

I take off my shoes and remove my earrings.
I place my wedding ring in my desk drawer and pull back my hair.
Stripped of everything extra, barefoot, and in simple clothes,
I come to the canvas once more.
Feeling my own trepidations while standing before it
I face myself, as I look outward toward another.
Again and again, I face myself.
Again and again, I face the ‘other.’
I am ripped open, soothed, unsettled, and settled once more.
We (you and I/other) exist in our co-vulnerability.
In love and compassion, we journey together.
Where will this journey take me, take us?
What will be its ripples, pushing outward, expanding in unexpected ways?



Figure 1: *Untitled. Acrylic on canvas. 4ft x 4ft*



Figure 2: *Untitled detail. Acrylic on canvas.*

In this practice of showing up, I lean upon a secular understanding of the term ritual and consider the ritualization of art-making as an ongoing practice where one repeatedly embodies and embraces the participatory nature of making-thinking-doing but does not cling to established traditions and outcomes. In other words, the ritual and ritualization are formed in relation to one’s lived experience. This perspective on ritual as dynamic and responsive, as Bickel (2020) points out, is part of emergent or nascent rituals that do not have previous attachments but might offer adaptable structures, or “structurings,”

for the self and students to work within (p. 25). From this perspective, rather than being associated with ceremonial procedures and rites, the rituals and the ritualization become emergent and responsive themselves (Grimes, 2000). Viewing rituals and ritualization in this manner, as emergent and responsive, frees them from a more traditional anthropological perspective where something is culturally and historically rooted in signs and symbols (Geertz, 1983), and instead creates a more malleable framework. This idea, that ritualizing processes might be emergent and unrelated to religious practices, is not unprecedented and lends itself well to art-making. Ritual theorist Ronald Grimes (1992, 2000, 2013) identifies the natural invention of rites in society, or what he refers to as self-creating ceremony, emerging ritual, and ritualization. Additionally, scholar, artist, and educator, Barbara Bickel (2020) speaks about ritual as being in the in-between spaces, one finds the “sacred space of ritual” in the margins and through the work of art-making (or what Bickel identifies from artist, philosopher, and scholar Bracha L. Ettinger as *artworking*) (p. 5). For me and this work, the ritualization of the creative process was not a pre-formed goal. Rather, it became a noticeable practice that took shape along the way and formed through the repeated acts of coming to, of showing up and stepping into the art-making process; it became a structuring within which I could greet myself, materials, and the world at large without knowing the outcome in advance.

I return again and again to the canvas.
I return again and again to you.
You expect me to say something to you in this moment.
I pause. Breathe. Take a moment to center myself.
I return to you.
I return to me.
There is a false separation of self and other.
We meet at the junction of our shared experiences
with an open mind and permeable heart,
not knowing where we will land.



Figure 3: *Untitled detail. Acrylic on canvas.*

Ritualizing the creative process was not something I anticipated doing, but through its occurrence, I have begun to question how the ritualization of both art-making and art-teaching might free us from more outcome-based practices. Generally speaking, ritualization is thought to be about engaging in a special experience outside of one’s daily activities (Bell, 1997). However, religious studies scholar Catherine Bell (1997) asks us to rethink and reconsider how ritualization might shift from a special activity to a “flexible and strategic way of acting” (p. 139). As someone who identifies as an artist and art teacher, I interpret this description, a “flexible and strategic way of acting,” to mean engaging in an act repeatedly, while still recognizing that the outcome is not always predictable. This is not unlike the creative process, particularly painting for me. Each time I run my hands over the blank canvas, dip the paint brush into the color, feel the paint on my fingertips, and move with the canvas in certain ways, nuanced and varied experiences are being generated. Similarly, like this ‘coming to’ of my body to the canvas repeatedly, I come to the classroom space with a framework for engagement and a loose grip on predetermined outcomes. As a ritualized practice, this is not always easy to do or embody on a consistent basis, and yet that difficulty might be the primary justification or reason for continuing to pursue this line of inquiry. To think about the ritualization of teaching art, in the same way as one might consider the ritualization of the creative process, is to examine how we might move within a stable, even repeatable structure and remain open to the fluid nature of learning, making, and teaching. Yet both art-making and art-teaching, in this more fluid and responsive way, are not without their own trepidations and forms of hesitations or concerns. As both an

educator and an artist, when I face the canvas and students, both never a blank slate, already filled with their own sense of wonder and figuration, I experience joy mixed with a bit of fear. A sense of nervousness and excitement about the unknown is constantly present. However, I am comforted by these ritualized acts—repeated gestures in my body and mind that provide touchpoints of reliability and reassurance as I move through teaching and creating.

I look in the mirror every day,
the mirror looks back at me
for over forty years.
Change is in the cracks, in the spaces between time.
Difference—the accumulated evidence of its existence rests in
my reflection.
I've been teaching in this space,
this space has been teaching in me
for over forty years.
We never quite look the same.
We face each other in our unknown.
Yet we still come back, again and again.
Hand in hand, artist and teacher, teacher and student, desk
and body, space and sound, self and other.
We are relational.

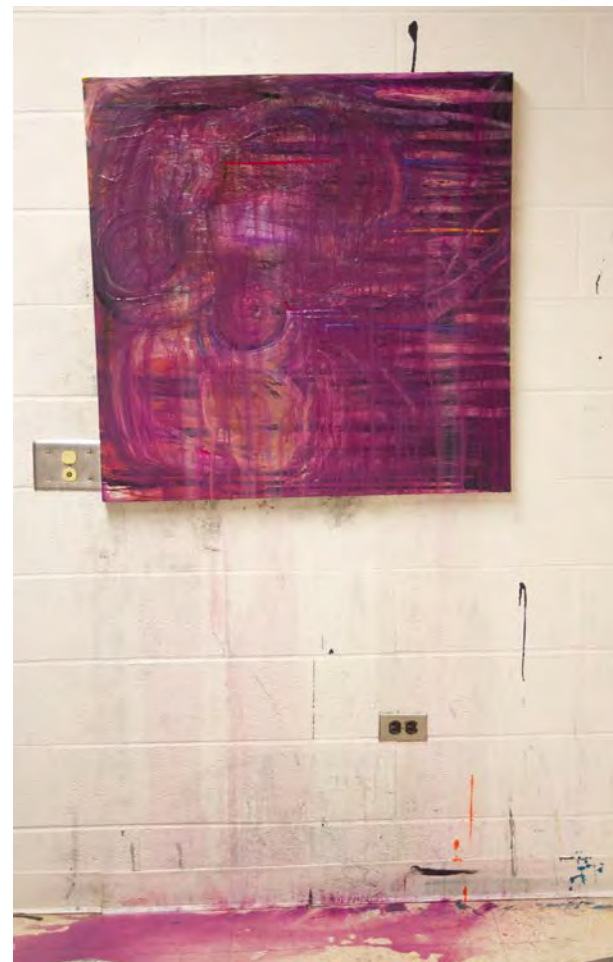


Figure 4: *Untitled. Acrylic on canvas. 4ft x 4ft.*

Drips on the floor, splashes on the wall.
The run off stays with me, never really cast aside.
Diluted by water, cold pink runs under my toes.
I am startled by the sensation in my feet.
Splashing around before I wipe you with a rag.
Yet, there is no wiping of the wall.
As much as I try, the color stays, traces absorbed in the cracks.
It feels heavy, almost sad.
Reminding me to come back.
Reminding me to not give up.
Reminding me to show up daily and from a place of allowance.

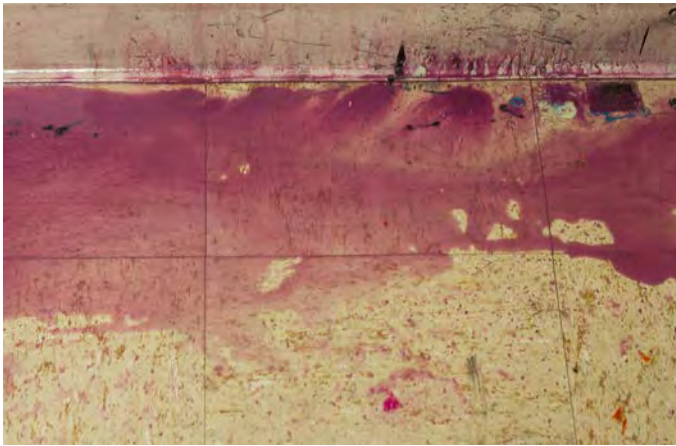


Figure 5: *Untitled. Acrylic on the floor.*

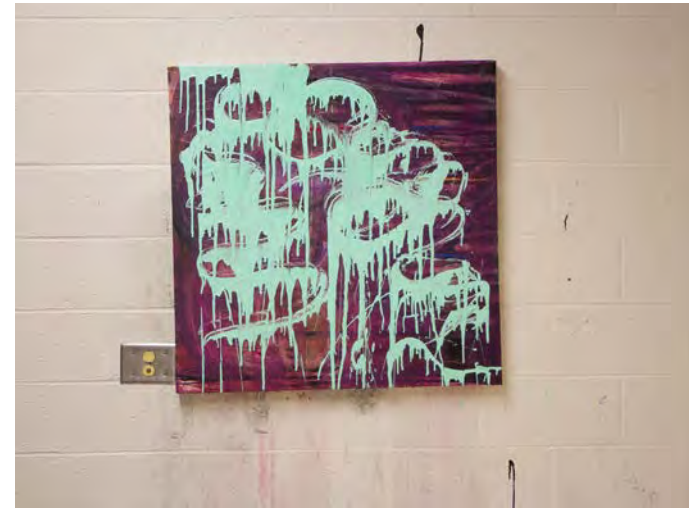


Figure 6: *Untitled. Acrylic on canvas. 4ft x 4ft*

In the end, I believe the work is in showing up, coming to a space and/or practice in a way that allows the ritualization of processes to emerge. In art-making this may look like removing your shoes, entering into a quiet space for yourself, engaging with materials in a particular way, etc. In teaching, this may appear as ritualizing how you prepare for your day, how you enter your classroom space, structure your teaching, or move through your day. For each person, the ritualization of these processes will be individual and self-determined. Yet, perhaps, the connecting thread is that the act of ritualizing holds the potential to prepare us for the unknown, providing a flexible framework for that which is to be on the canvas, on the wall, on the floor, in the classroom, or through one's teaching.

We met our temporary end.
 Questions still hung in the air, but there was nowhere to go.
 So, we wait.
 We show up, we persist, we commit.
 We get quiet.
 And we actively wait for what's to come.

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