



* On Images and Enactments *

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Archaic Ritual Arts for Embodying Extra-Ordinary, Mythically Manifold Meaning and Status

The notion that there are ‘arts for precipitating participation in the radical complexity of concurrent being and becoming’ suggests that human cultures have long been concerned with such practices. Some commentators assert that the historical origins of what is considered ‘art’ or artistic creativity derive from cultural contexts in which such practices were regarded as primarily concerned with precipitating such participation. In this view, artful representation was neither a matter of ‘personal aesthetic expression’ nor commercial activity. Instead, it appears as ritualized engagement with extra-ordinary statuses of being and becoming whose manifold meaningfulness is so radically complex it is ‘mythical.’ How then is ‘the art of ritual practice’ thought to induce ‘participation in concurrent status’ and does that effect relate to contemporary contexts for artistic expression?

Origins of Extra-Ordinary Knowing in the Artful Expressions of Ritual

Evidence for manifestation of artful human expression is said to derive from at least 30,000 years ago. Most widely known of the oldest examples are the paintings on cave walls in Europe that depict a variety of mammals which were likely hunted by humans. There are also numerous sites in Africa and Australia where similarly ancient depictions of animals and human figures appear on rock cliffs. These images range in style from ‘stick figures’ to elaborately detailed, dramatically posed tableaux of elegantly stylized characterizations. Overall, the style of these images can be characterized as overtly symbolic rather than simply literalistic. Some figures do express a powerful and majestic ‘life-like’ aura, others appear in a more iconographic style. In some instances

the style appears overtly abstract or geometric. Human figures are often depicted with what appear to be symbolic markings and attire. Some examples present overtly metamorphic combinations of human and animal qualities and other ‘fantastic’ entities. More historically recent examples of this archaic ‘art form’ are still generated by surviving elements of archaic cultures, such as some Australian Aboriginal societies.

There appears little evidence that these most archaic representations served to record historical events, mathematical accounts, personal histories, or political dynasties. Various commentators on these most ancient manifestations of artful expression have speculated that they were involved in, or refer to, magical, spiritual, or ritual enactments. Anthropologists studying the remnants of archaic cultures in modern times have found that such artful expressions are seldom regarded as ‘works of art’ but rather as manifestations of more-than-human consciousness and intention in the world (i.e., spirits, divinities, ‘forces’). Representation of metamorphic entities that ‘un-naturally’ combine characteristics of known species or constitute ‘super natural’ creatures is associated with this notion. These figures were, and in some instances still are, regarded as ‘inhabitants’ of the extra-ordinary realms depicted in cultural mythologies. Their images and ‘impersonations’ were considered capable of providing access to a cosmological dimension of being that transcends or encompasses ordinary human consciousness and social structures. These figures and the stories in which they are featured thus constituted an ‘other world’ that is related to, and often is the origin of, ‘this world’ of ordinarily practical and socially conventional existence.

Archaic ritual enactments typically referenced these mythical entities in performances understood to have brought ‘ordinary humans’ into ‘direct contact’ with an extra-ordinary status of being. Participation in these rituals is described as inducing experience of some ‘actual transformation’ into such mythical status, evidently facilitated special dress, actions, symbols, and the enactment of mythical stories. In some cases, specific persons would more overtly embody other worldly beings (‘possessed’ by a spirit or god) so that people still in ‘ordinary status’ might experience that embodied presence. In such ways it can be said that the radically complex dynamics of extra-ordinary being were, or are, made overtly tangible in the mythical status of the artful expression of ritual contexts and performances. By way of such knowing and interpreting of the nature of being, people are thought to experience participation in its more-than-ordinary, mythically manifold, dynamical qualities.

Of Ritual, Cultural, Social, and Aesthetic Art

Within pre-modern or archaic cultural contexting, the symbolic objects of this ‘archaic art’ tend to be regarded somewhat differently than are their more modern counterparts. The more archaic or original expressions tend to represent overtly mythical figures and

stories that are traditional elements of a common cultural heritage known by all. The meaningfulness of these images and their themes are relatively extra-ordinary compared to those of daily life, yet understood by all to be relative to that more ordinary existence. Their status appears rather rarely to be that of ‘aesthetic objects’ created from a strictly ‘personal imagination,’ or possessed merely for decoration and pleasure, as appears typical of ‘art’ in modern contexting. That such a distinction can be made suggests that artful expression has a potential range of contextings that affects how its meaning is experienced. That range might be generalized as from a relatively ordinary to a more extra-ordinary status of signification. Indeed, more stratified civilized societies and modernist contexts appear to have emphasized differentiations of the range. Definitive distinctions between contextings for artistic representation are likely impossible to establish. However, a sketch of different potential emphasis will help qualify the character of the ritualistic and mythical aspects.

In the ritual context there appears to be the most overt involvement with the enactment or embodiment of extra-ordinarily complex being. In a broad respect, this ritual context seems part of what one might posit as a status for mythical art that represents shared images and stories of some ‘more-than-ordinary’ realm of reality. That contexting seems to provide the cosmological ‘background’ for cultural identity and thus for social structure—and thus for personal identity. In regard to how the term ‘artful representation’ is used here to indicate a function of manifesting extra-ordinary status, this quality appears to diminish in the shift from mythical toward more social contexting.

‘Cultural art’ in this scheme is concerned with expressing ‘the way things ideally are’ or ‘ought to be’—often in some reference to the mythical context of ‘how things really *really* are.’ This emphasis could be termed ‘religious art’ in that it positions the human in some supposedly appropriate or ideal relationship to a more extra-ordinarily mythical status (that of a supra-social ‘realm of the gods’ or radically interactive concurrency). Subordinate to such an overarching cultural context would be that of actual social structure and its operant relations between people of various social statuses. Here the emphasis for artful expression appears more concerned with ‘how things properly are’ in socially structured life. This more explicitly social art is distinguished by representations that primarily assert and affirm more ordinary, socially defined identities, reality, and order. A primary concern in this contexting tends to be affirming existing orders of power and conditions for identity and reality (social, commercial, and political ‘art’). However, that concern can also be employed in a critical reaction to the status quo, as in ‘revolutionary art’ used to represent a different social order.

This distinction between cultural and social functions of artful expression is an important one because the two can be in conflict. Cultural values shared by most

members of a society and understood to derive from some mythical background of extra-ordinary being are often not actually reflected in operant social structures of class, economy, and political power. Thus, for example, the shared cultural ideal of human equality is rarely implemented literally in social orders of power and wealth. Both such cultural ideals and reiterations of the ‘proper’ distribution of power in the actuality of social and economic inequities can ‘appear’ in the same artful representations—either in either conflicting or complimentary association. The social context tends to ‘justify’ its order in relation to that of cultural ideals, often by distorting these. But the social is typically the most reductive contexting because it tends to assert socialized definitions of status as proper truths. Commercial motives and contexts for art present a prominent form of such assertion.

Lastly, there appears the more contemporary, perhaps particularly Westernized status of artful expression as primarily an ‘aesthetic object’ that is created from the imagination of individual artists and is not necessarily a representation of cultural values or social standards. This category of aesthetic art is used to indicate an emphasis on the felt responses individuals experience in association with artful representations rather than associating these to a shared cultural or socially structured set of meanings. As such, though it is not overtly associated with traditions for ritual inductions or mythical status, this context seems to have more potential for dislocating habitually reductive modes of knowing and interpreting induced by practical concerns and social standards than does that of overtly social art. Art concerned primarily with social standards is necessarily reductive to ‘properly’ defined statuses. The context of commercial advertising for art is an example of this reductive function. As individualistically created and encountered, artful form in the aesthetic contexting is positioned better to depart from, or challenge, socialized definitions of identity and reality. However, since it tends to exist without reference to an overtly mythological status or ritual tradition, its ‘aesthetic effects’ tend to be encountered and interpreted in reference to the relatively reductive modes of ordinarily socialized knowing.

A link ‘back’ from aesthetic contexting to the archaic ritualized one can be noted in some shared emphasis upon transience and impermanence. Many anthropological studies of the remnants of archaic cultures in modern times indicate that much of the artful expression generated for ritual enactments is granted only a temporary existence. In the most general characterization of this process, it is created, imbued with mythical energies or entities (spirits, gods) and after the conclusion of ritual enactments, it is often destroyed or abandoned as if no longer of significance. Traditional Tibetan butter sculptures that are allowed to melt, Karalan stone powder paintings that are ‘erased,’ and Japanese paper lantern boats that are released to be lost in the water offer examples of this mode. These instances suggest that the ‘thingness’ of the object, like the literality of enacted gestures, appears to ‘embody’ the presence of some more-than-ordinary

status of being only during the ritualized engagement between ordinary and extraordinary or mythical status. This ‘decomposition’ of the ritual object appears to be a way of emphasizing that its meaning is in its dynamical references not its physical actuality. Echoes of this attitude are found in contemporary “performance art” practices that involve the creation and destruction or abandonment of artful contexts and objects. Such avoidance of creating a permanent representation seems to emphasize an aesthetic and even conceptual status of meaning—one that is more difficult for socialized standards to reduce to a ‘thing’ that can be defined and possessed. Thus the ‘art of art’ becomes more psychological and participates more overtly in the ‘thinglessness of things’ that manifest in the multiplicities of concurrent being and becoming.

Contemporary Aesthetic Artistic Expression and Inductions of Mythically Inclusive Knowing

These proposed categories of mythical, cultural, social, and aesthetic are not intended to suggest any absolute distinctions between art forms as such. However, they are useful in terms of understanding how all artful expressions can be contexted differently and thereby tend to be known and interpreted. It can be argued that, since contemporary Westernized society tends to deny any valid logical basis for the ‘extra-ordinary reality’ of mythical status, that the more overtly ritualized context for traditionally shared art is not viable. Thus the only remaining option for engaging artful expression as having the potential to precipitate mythically inclusive participation in the radical complexity of concurrent being/becoming is through personalized aesthetic contexting. It seems likely that this potential is what gives modernist art its qualities of ‘non-conformist’ or ‘anti-structural’ potency. In so far as it is ‘revolutionary’ it often presents more an ‘epistemological revolt’ than a social one—much of 20th Century artistic style can be seen as a reaction against reduction of all existence to ordinary status. But again, in the absence of a ritualistic, mythical tradition that regards it as the appropriate mode for inducing or precipitating some embodied experience of mythical dynamism it lacks social validity. That is, archaic societies actually validated ruptures in the dominance of ordinarily reductive status. In the absence of such ‘self-negation of socialized reduction’ the effects of even the most radically interactive dynamics of artful representations on overall knowing and understanding are likely to be quite limited.

In overtly mythical cultures of archaic contexts, there appears little logical difficulty in accepting ‘more than one realm of reality.’ Thus encounters with mythical status and knowing of radical complexity are readily validated by social standards even though the latter are thereby subordinated to the realm of the radically complex or ‘anti-structural status of nature.’ Such societies are structured so as to affirm how mythically inclusive knowing shifts one’s perspective to a ‘larger view’ of what is real and meaningful (a cosmological one). In more modernist contemporary societies where standards for

reality derive from notions of mechanistic function and scientific quantification (the effective cultural ideals), the dominance of reductively linear, self-consistent logic poses great resistance to validating any mythical status. Thus some culturally valid logic is required that will reasonably affirm the ‘reality of the un-reality’ made manifest in artful expression’s dynamic re-presentations of concurrency and its radical complexity.

In brief, such a logic that could restore some of the epistemic potency of ritual acts and mythical representations might proceed as follows. Given the mechanistic ideal of modernist culture, singularly positivistic assertions of actual status establish what is termed ‘the real.’ What is ordinarily, empirically possible in terms of cause and effect is a primary reference. That status of reality is established in considerable part by the abstract reductions of quantification or measurement. In the logical mode, positive status is established in reference to linear, self-consistent rationalizing. What is not empirically plausible, measurable, or consistently logical thus establishes ‘negative status.’ This condition of ‘not being’ or ‘un-truth’ thus can be termed the ‘not real.’ If one encounters representation that can be regarded as not real by these ordinary standards of reality, then the ‘reality’ of that representation is negated—except, perhaps, as its physical components of paint, canvas, color, etc. Simply put, the assertion of a status ‘centaurs’ is negated by its positivistic impossibility or un-reality. There are no half-horse, half-human entities according to socialized references for reality and identity. If, however, there appears any rational basis for determining that a particular form of expression is not real, yet in some ways is an accurate or actual representation of phenomena, then the negation of it is negated. The resulting logical status can be determined as the ‘negation of negation’ in which the ‘not real’ becomes the ‘not not real,’ ‘the un-real real,’ or ‘the impossibly real.’

Such a logic can be used to describe how the metaphorically metamorphic dynamism of representation that manifests the mythically manifold, concurrent yet discontinuous meanings of mythical status is a valid re-presentation, in dynamic form, of the actualities of concurrent being. Psychologically, the status ‘centaur’ can be understood as a logically appropriate representation of the ‘internal’ psycho-dynamic (but quite real) struggle of a ‘manyness in/of/as oneness’—a concurrency figured as the conjunction of human reason and ‘animal impulses’ or ‘passion’ in one (appropriately) discontinuous body. Such is the epistemic mode of knowing employed in the ‘arts of ritual induction for embodying extra-ordinary status.’ The aesthetic category for artful representation can be regarded as similarly enabling engagement with such mythically dynamic re-presentation. Thus, it provides at least some potential epistemic qualities for precipitating participation in the dynamical nature of concurrent being and becoming.

* * * Additional articulation of these notions in Chapters 2, 3, and 7 of text **Manifesting the Many in the One** on page of that title * * *

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