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Conjuring Strange and Ancient Larvae:
Barry William Hale and the Negotiations of Occult Performance*

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Abstract

Barry William Hale is an Australian artist and occultist whose art and performance has effectively crossed boundaries between occult-friendly spaces and traditional arts venues. What I will be exploring in this essay is the interplay between the artist's own conception of his work and the other conditions of performance that inform its reception and interpretation. While Hale's work sits within a long tradition of occult performance art that seeks to both produce a transformative effect and introduce symbols and concepts to a wider, non-practitioner audience, I argue that the venues in which these works are performed provide their own interpretive frameworks that inform the audience, creating a layer of safety and social acceptance for spiritual practices/traditions that would otherwise be considered heretical or taboo.

Keywords: occult art; performance; museums; festival; ritual; ethnography

I first encountered the work of Barry William Hale (1969–) in 2010 at the Esoteric Book Conference in Seattle, where he was performing with his group, NOKO210, on the Saturday evening show. Hale is a large, imposing mountain of a man who is in total control of his physicality. He has a presence, but more importantly, he is present. The stage was set very sparsely with three elevated screens and a station to the side where someone was programming sound, light, and images. Hale took to the stage and walked around a circle. From what I recall, there was already a sigil or group of sigils on the floor within a circle.

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He then quietly sat down and began a low, rhythmic droning with his voice, reminiscent of Tuvan throat singing. Suddenly, images and colors were being projected at a very rapid-fire pace on screens to the left, right, and behind him. It was clear to me that the placement of each image was designed to hit the same central point on each screen so the viewer was being brought to the same visual point repeatedly. I can barely recall most of the images, but I absolutely noted the recurrence of Enochian tablets, and the "angelic language" allegedly revealed to John Dee (1527–1608) and Edward Kelley (1555–1597) in the 16th century. Hale was on his knees, rocking back and forth to his own droning voice as the images on the screen flashed quickly. I looked around and the audience was transfixed. Paralyzed. I thought to myself: "This guy is good!" before I, too, succumbed to the sound and the lights.

Thankfully, after NOKO210's performance, there was an intermission so we could stretch our legs and clear our heads, and that is when a member of our party exploded: "How could he do that?! I didn't consent to that! What did he just program into my brain?" I admit I was slightly embarrassed by this outburst. My immediate response was that this was a ritual art performance and my friend was probably just overreacting, but then I shifted frame and started asking myself some hard questions about my own reaction from an anthropological perspective. Yes, this was an artistic performance, but it was also a ritual. What, in fact, was my role in this event? Participant? Observer? Did I just take part in a conjuration of something I did not understand or consent to? Most importantly, if I dismiss this as "just an art performance," is this, perhaps, suggesting that the spiritual content is not to be taken seriously? Did the venue and context itself frame this as "art" and not "religion"? Suddenly so many questions emerged that I decided perhaps I should sit down with the artist.

This paper is the result of a series of conversations and interviews between myself and the occult performance artist Barry William Hale regarding his performance process, his art, his practice, and where his work sits in relation to

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a wider tradition of occult ritual theater. This is an ethnographic study reliant on interview data and conversations with Hale, including comments from his collaborator Scott Barnes.

What I will be exploring in this essay is the interplay between the artist's own conception of his work and the other conditions of performance that inform its reception and interpretation. While Hale's work does sit within a long tradition of occult performance art that seeks to both produce a transformative effect and to introduce symbols and concepts from the Western occult corpus to a wider, non-practitioner audience, I argue that the venues in which these works are performed provide their own frameworks for interpretation that inform the audience and create a layer of safety and social acceptance for spiritual practices and traditions that would otherwise be considered heretical or taboo. Although Hale is, in fact, presenting religious material to an audience in a way that is meant to be transformative, this narrative is competing with the narratives of both artistic and ethnographic display that provide a comfortable space for these rites to be safely witnessed. Ultimately, these performances become coded as "art" for the audience rather than "religion," which may prescribe the role of the audience primarily as observer rather than participant. If these performances are more accurately characterized as art rather than religion, what might the implications be for artists like Hale who hope to cultivate a greater public understanding of contemporary occult practice as a legitimate subset of Western religious traditions?

Barry William Hale and NOKO210

Barry William Hale is an Australian visual and performance artist whose work draws on a number of artistic and spiritual traditions including Aleister Crowley's (1875–1947) religion Thelema, indigenous Mexican magical traditions, Haitian Vodou, and Palo Mayombe. Additionally, Hale is an accomplished martial artist, and he also works with somatic practices and neurofeedback in both his spiritual and artistic work. The impact of both these practices is also evident in

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his performance pieces. Hale's performance art is the product of NOKO210, a 25 year-long partnership with Scott Barnes and also formerly with Michael Sturm. Barnes, who is not an occult practitioner, creates the soundscape and programs the images, while Hale constructs and performs the ritual activity. Despite their longstanding collaboration, they have performed publicly as NOKO210 under a dozen times. They have performed in a range of venues internationally, from arts festivals as large as the Australian Biennale to museums and esoteric events attended primarily by practitioners.

Much of Hale's early personal background with performing public ritual reflects his time in an Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) Lodge that was very involved with performing public rites as a form of cultural and social outreach. This not only inspired the development of his performance, but also influenced his approach to exploring the sacred in more public spaces and creating transformative experiences for people outside of his spiritual tradition. Hale still wants to influence the public conversation and create a more open reception to occult imagery and practice, but he also wants to impact the religious culture in which he is involved. He notes that part of his work is to expand the culture of Thelema from within:

> I think that my early exposure to the Order "down under" and the environment encouraged performing magical rituals in public and also combined with my own endeavors to expand Thelemic culture to include an artistic and broader cultural perspective.[1]

Much of the dialogue inspiring this paper was informed by two of Hale's magical projects which generated several performance pieces. One, *Hypercube 210*, is the ritual I witnessed at the Esoteric Book Conference in Seattle in 2010. *Hypercube 210* is a complex work relating to linguistics and the Enochian angelic language developed by John Dee and Edward Kelly. For the 2011 performance of this piece at the Adelaide Fringe Festival, Hale wrote:

> This project represents a new direction in the esoteric research and investigation of the Enochian Magical System, with particular focus on the *Lingua vel Adamica*, or the

1. Hale, personal correspondence, August 2, 2017.

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> Enochian Alphabet, received in the 15th century [*sic*] by Dr. John Dee, consultant to Queen Elizabeth I, and Edward Kelley, and popularized in modern occult circles by Aleister Crowley. HYPERCUBE 210 comprises twenty-one discrete elements, analogous to the twenty-one letters of the Enochian Alphabet, these are arranged into a triptych where each of the seven compositions structurally references its numeric correlate: Engaging in esoteric ritual through abstracted experimental sound and visuals, erupting into what is traditionally considered a fine arts arena.[2]

The second magical project which informed this paper is Hale's long-term spiritual relationship with the winged deity Beelzebub. Beelzebub, often translated as "Lord of the Flies," is considered to be a prince of demons and has been associated with both Satan and Lucifer. Hale's spiritual relationship with this entity has inspired a number of artistic works in a variety of media. *Legion 49* is a grimoire of stunning graphic icons of the servitors of Beelzebub inspired by the tradition of *papel picado*, or cut paper art, which in Mexico is associated with Day of the Dead altars. His hour-long multimedia piece, *The Conjuration of Beelzebub*, published as a DVD by Fulgur Ltd., is a long form, non-narrative sound and image project which is completely unmediated for the viewer by any contextual material. Here is Hale's description:

> The work is articulated in a sevenfold structure which takes the participant to the arcane deserts of the Middle East into Plato's Cave and through the inverted spire of the infernal chapel, opening the Gates of Hell, conjuring Lord of the Flies and his legions. [In terms of] Musicology the work locates and maps loci of Luciferian eruptions into popular culture, sampling and working with sources appropriate to these periods; from medieval pacts and grimoires through to the devil beat of early jazz and seventies Satanic rock, departing with the prophetic first emanations of the Order 41.[3]

Similarly to the live performance of *Hypercube 210*, this piece has a deeply somatic quality caused by rapidly flashing images and droning music that ebbs, flows, speeds up to a frenzy, and then slows down like a long arc of a pulse.

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2. "NOKO: HYPERCUBE 210 at Adelaide Fringe Festival," LAShTAL, accessed July 28, 2017, https://www.lashtal.com/1399-old-news/.

3. Hale, personal correspondence, September 8, 2015.

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There have also been several live performances based on this magical project, one of which was at the Australian Biennale in 2010.

History of "Occult" Ritual Performance

Despite the impressive and contemporary use of technology, much of Hale's performance is inspired by the same principles of immersion and the promise of a change of consciousness that have driven occult ritual performance art since the nineteenth century, and this sense of lineage is an important feature of Hale's personal narrative about his work. By way of a brief detour, there have been several nuanced debates by scholars of contemporary esotericism about the nature of the term "occult" as it relates to the wider history of esotericism.[4] Occultism, as used in this essay, is a modern social and cultural manifestation of esoteric practices which coalesced in nineteenth-century France, resulting in a flowering of organized groups and esoterically focused institutions such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society, to name perhaps the most influential. The phrase "occult revival" is still in popular usage referring to this flowering in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, implying a rediscovery or continuation of past practice. Yet Owen and Strube in particular characterize contemporary occultism as defined not by revival but by conditions of modernity and engagement with scientific and often progressive discourses.[5] Hale's work explicitly reflects this synthesis and this history, particularly as he sees his own blending of technology and esoteric practice in art as exemplifying those historical features. Nevertheless, despite the modern nature of occult identities, the idea that occult practices have

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4. Marco Pasi "Occultism"; Hanegraaff, "Occult/Occultism"; Hanegraaff, "Esotericism Theorized," 162. Hanegraaff's attempts at providing an overarching "etic" category of the term occult based on responses to disenchantment and secularity have not been uniformly accepted.

5. For wider discussions about the modern occult milieu and progressive thought, see also Strube, "Occultist Identity Formations Between Theosophy and Socialism in Fin-de-Siècle France" and Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*.

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ancient lineages and universal resonances is also important to understanding how modern practitioners, such as Hale, position their work.[6]

As Hale relates his own story he intentionally situates his performance within a wider tradition of occult theater derived from the nineteenth century combining somatic, ecstatic, and symbolic elements. As Edmund Lingan has detailed in *The Theatre of the Occult Revival* (2014), from the late nineteenth century occult ritual theater has trodden a fine line between art and ritual, and it has often been promoted in spaces and in ways which blur the line between artistic spectacle and religious event. This leads to questions about how we might characterize these sorts of performances.[7] Customarily, we expect religious ritual to be conducted in a space that is sanctified and custom built for that purpose such as a church, temple or synagogue. Religious ritual in the West is normally not conducted in places that are "secular," such as museums or art festivals, and the people who witness and participate generally know and understand the nature of the ritual in which they are participating. While church services, for example, may operate under an open-door policy, they are normally not public events.

By comparison, since the late nineteenth century occultists have been using the blurred lines of ritual and theater to inspire spiritually uplifting experiences for a broader audience, and in more public venues. Spiritualism, which was skyrocketing in popularity in the mid-nineteenth century, relied on the cultivation of high theatricality by the medium to create an atmosphere where the otherworldly could be conveyed and experienced by participants in a more public environment and outside of a strictly ritual context.[8] While séances were certainly not billed as theater, they were recognized as entertainment and were perhaps more closely allied to popular entertainments of the day such as some carnival acts.[9] However, the skills, conventions and performative elements drawn

6. See also Strube, "Occultist Identity Formations," 569.
7. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival*, chap. 1, Kindle.
8. Owen, *The Darkened Room,* 42, 49–74; Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments*, 3–4.
9. Natale, "The Medium on the Stage," 240.

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from the theater heightened the experience of the participants and created an atmosphere of liminality and unrehearsed spectacle. Still, the participants were not being introduced to bodies of sacred narrative in any sort of formalized manner that might be considered initiatory or socially transformative.

In both France and Britain, the last two decades of the nineteenth century saw the introduction of more generally traditional theatre spaces and theatrical conventions to promote occult ideas to a wider audience. Art and occult ritual shared audiences, venues, and techniques that were interchangeable, and in the 1890s a tradition of occult performance developed that was much more art than religion. It was performed in secular contexts and venues, yet the performances were not secular by design. Dennis Denisoff argues that the late nineteenth-century journal *Borderlands*, founded by W.B. Snead, which was largely an attempt to promote scientific discourses around Spiritualism, was instrumental in also promoting the idea that mainstream theatre could be a useful vehicle in bringing occult matter to a wider audience as part of a broader cultural shift focusing on spiritual development.[10] Very likely, this perspective was not only the result of the public interest in theatrical séances, but was also due to the impact of the Cambridge Ritualists and the publication of James Frazer's (1854–1941) *The Golden Bough* in 1890, which should not be underestimated in inspiring this early generation of ritual performance.[11] Frazer and, perhaps more critically, Jane Ellen Harrison (1850–1928) argued that myth emerged from the earliest religious ritual expressions, and theater later developed from performances of myth.[12] In that vein, many of these early ritual performers intended to give the audience what they believed was a primordially religious experience. Through combining symbol, theatrical, and ritual techniques, they would cause an altered state of consciousness and provide the audience with

10. Denisoff, "Performing the Spirit."

11. Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School,* 45–66; Van Kleek, "The Art of the Law," 67.

12. For a review of Harrison's primary impact on myth and ritual theory see Carpentier, "Jane Ellen Harrison and the Ritual Theory," 12–13.

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a "primitive" religious experience that transcended time and history, possibly resulting in a wider societal moral uplifting.

In France, the Symbolist performances within the late Salons de la Rose + Croix organized by Joseph Peladán (1858–1918) from 1892 were other early examples of transformative occult theater practice. Symbolist theater was designed to inspire the experience of eternal truths in the audience through the use of heavy-handed imagery, metaphor, color and sound, a sort of spiritual technology of theater. While the actors were meant to deliver their lines in a detached iconic fashion, the audience was intended to sensually engage with the performance through costume and interactivity.[13] Peladán's Salons were meant to be reforming efforts which would redirect the attention of the participants away from the material and towards the perennial and spiritual.[14] Like the occult performers who followed him, Peladán sought to recreate a theatrical experience which harkened back to a time when theatrical performances were religious rites.[15] In his *Prométhéide* series, Peládan strategically employed ritual-like speech and gesture to create an immersive and liminal environment for the viewer, designed to be spiritually transformative and initiatory in nature.

Similarly, from about 1890 onward, members of the Golden Dawn employed similar technologies and techniques to augment their traditional performance skills in private ritual, as well as in the development of theatrical productions outside the context of the Golden Dawn. Florence Farr (1860–1917) may have been one of the most innovative Golden Dawn members in this respect. Farr was a ritual theater pioneer and leading member of the Golden Dawn who not only wrote, acted, and directed, but she also developed somatic techniques for theatrical and ritual use both inside and outside of the Golden Dawn context.[16] Her "cantillated poetry," which she also called "the music of speech," was inspired

13. Deak, "Kaloprosopia: The Art of Personality," 7.
14. Monaghan, "Peládan's Symbolist *Prométhéide,*" 404.
15. Deak, *Symbolist Theatre*, 127; Monaghan "Peládan's Symbolist *Prométhéide*," 412.
16. Pécastaing-Boissière, "Wisdom is a Gift Given to the Wise."

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by Irish and Homeric oral poetry techniques, and it involved a musical reading of poetry accompanied by a psaltery, the techniques of which she later detailed in her 1909 book *The Music of Speech*. The technique seemed to evoke a trancelike state in the audience, and she applied it in her role as Aleel in Yeats's 1898 production *The Countess Cathleen*. While there has been a great deal of scholarly focus on her collaborations with W.B. Yeats (1865–1939) and her Golden Dawn-related writings,[17] she should also be recognized in her own right for the development of ritual theatrical techniques and her productions with Olivia Shakespear (1863–1938), *The Shrine of the Golden Hawk* and *The Beloved of Hathor*, both of which were designed to communicate eternal truths through mythic theater.

Aleister Crowley's 1910 *Rites of Eleusis* was a series of seven publicly performed rituals designed to invoke the "energies" of each of the seven classical planets, and marks a turning point in the use of certain performative and sensory elements meant to induce an ecstatic state. Tracy Tupman argued that the Rites were "one of the first attempts in the twentieth century to consciously create a psychological connection between theatrical and religious practice within the western hegemonic society."[18] While Crowley was building on the idea of producing a transhistorical spiritual experience for participants, he very explicitly employed ecstatic techniques in the performances, including drumming, dancing, and chanting, all of which were designed to produce altered states of consciousness in the audience.[19] This was a deliberate attempt to cultivate what Crowley considered to be "exotic" and "primitive" elements within Western occult ritual. He believed that the religious rituals of non-Western cultures were more liberating and that these ecstatic elements would provide participants with an atavistic religious experience.[20] While Farr was incorporating techniques that

17. Laity, "W.B. Yeats and Florence Farr," 620–37; Johnson, "Florence Farr: Letters to W. B. Yeats," 281–322; Hassett, "Where the Blessed Dance: Florence Farr," 37–64.

18. Tupman, "Theatre Magick: Aleister Crowley and the Rites of Eleusis," ii.

19. Crowley, "The Rites of Eleusis: Their Origin and Meaning," 384; also Van Kleek, "The Art of the Law," 67.

20. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival,* chap. 4, Kindle.

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might be considered somatic and meant to inspire trance-like states, Crowley, inspired partially by Symbolist theatre, was attempting to bring his audience, and even more so the participants, into an active state of religious ecstasy.[21] Crowley's promotion and use of these techniques somewhat informed the general trajectory of ritual construction among modern occultists and Pagans. Gerald Gardner (1884–1964), inspired partially by Crowley and perhaps more significantly by his time in Sri Lanka and Borneo, also incorporated ecstatic elements into the corpus of rituals of what is now called the Gardnerian tradition of Witchcraft with the same aim of reconstructing a "primitive" ritual experience for participants, which he believed was foundational to cultic rites.[22] Ultimately, techniques which produce an altered state of consciousness, particularly chanting, drumming, and dancing, became common features in the ritual landscape of eclectic religious Witchcraft (Wicca).

Although Hale's work might be described as "edgy" and sits comfortably in the artistic and festival venues where it is most frequently observed, his work owes a great deal to some of the techniques used by the occult ritualists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, many of Hale's ideas about the process and efficacy of his work are perfectly resonant with the theories of ritual, transformation, and efficacy which drove early occult ritual theater. Here, Hale's personal description of his process hearkens back to Crowley's characterization of the "primitive" elements that he included in the Rites of Eleusis:

> These [sonic] elements blended together [with the magical incantations, ritual props, projection/video] are for me a trance induction. It is worth mentioning that the essential elements inherent to our ritual performance partake of some of the earliest articulations of spiritual technology associated with shamanism—which include voice, sound and light. Although we used technology contemporary to our age, essentially I believe there is little or no difference.[23]

21. Brown, "Aleister Crowley's *Rites of Eleusis*," 12–13.
22. Lingan, *The Theatre of the Occult Revival,* chap. 5, Kindle; see also Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft,* 46–47.
23. Hale, personal correspondence, September 9, 2015.

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Hale's collaborator in NOKO210, Scott Barnes, noted that they are using the tools at hand to achieve the same ends as earlier ritualists in the Western tradition:

> Just as strict protocols and preparation are often required for the successful performance of a Magical Rite, the correct construction of a magical circle, making and consecration of ritual tools, the preparation of talismans, so too the meticulous integration of associated data specific to the magical operation in the preproduction and production of the sound materials. For example; magical formulas, names, codes, numbers and permutations that relate to the specific Magical Operation are greatly considered and integrated into the very sound production itself. Much in the same way magical Kameas or [magical] Squares might be constructed or Gematric applications are standardly used in some magical operations. The only difference here is that the data feeds into parametric aspects of the sound production which is a data sonification.[24]

Matters of Definition: Performance Art or Religion?

However, do Hale's rituals fall primarily in the category of religion, or are they more comfortably defined as performance art? And what features might influence how we might define them? It seems that Hale's work crosses into several different categories which influence the reception and interpretation of his work by an audience. Ritual and theater are, of course, historically and formally linked, and Hale's work is both. Rituals can be civic and secular or religious in nature, and as a rule are marked by an expectation of transformation. Yet, performance too relies on participation and transformation. William Beeman notes that ritual and performance have many shared defining features. For this discussion, I have listed the most salient of his observations here:

- Performance is purposeful enactment or display behavior carried out in front of an audience.
- Performance aims to change the cognitive state of participants.
- Some performers are more effective in this than others.
- Performance is collaborative behavior.

24. Barnes, personal correspondence, September 8, 2015.

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- Performance is iterative, ongoing, and ultimately unpredictable in its results.
- Performance takes place within culturally defined cognitive frames that have identifiable boundaries.
- The most effective performances are those in which the performers and audience achieve full engagement with the performance activity through "flow." [25]

Hale in his own narrative more frequently aligns himself with the history of occult and religious performance than the tradition of secular performance art. This emphasizes the religiosity of his performance and reinforces a sense of artistic and spiritual lineage. Yet his work also sits within the wider tradition of secular performance art incorporating elements of ritual and religious themes that are contextualized more securely as "art" and not "religion." Of course, Hale, being very artistically literate, is aware of how he sits within this grouping as well. Two different articles published in August 2017 in the online art journal *Artsy* addressed the recent upturn in "shamanic" and "mystic" practices among artists.[26] However, most of these performance artists, unlike Hale, are not performing within a religious context as adherents of particular practices. These artists may be providing a commentary on religious behavior or iconography, although they frequently employ elements of ritual or religiosity to cause a change of consciousness or awareness in the audience such as drumming or dance.[27]

The distinction is that Hale is a religious practitioner, using themes and techniques drawn from his own ritual and religious practice and presenting them to an audience in the context of performance art. He is not an outsider appropriating these images, although it is noteworthy that he is not performing rituals from the Thelemic corpus such as the Gnostic Mass in these primarily artistic venues. As such, his work is part idiosyncratic performance art, part religious ritual, and part cultural display.

25. Beeman, "Religion and Ritual Performance," 36.

26. Thackara, "Why Shamanic Practices Are Making a Comeback in Contemporary Art"; Artsy, "The *Artsy* Podcast, No. 45."

27. See particularly Thackara, "Why Shamanic Practices Are Making a Comeback in Contemporary Art."

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Hale is one of a number of contemporary esoteric artists who are also practitioners and who have used ritual and symbolic elements to communicate esoteric principles roughly within a secular artistic context. Perhaps the most well-known is the pioneering filmmaker Kenneth Anger (1927–), whose Thelema-inspired works were not only rituals depicted on film. Anger believed they were also invocations and magical workings designed to impart mythic truths to the viewer.[28] Orryelle (1969–) is another Australian visual and performance artist who conducts ritual performance art and installations in a variety of gallery and festival spaces, with the intention of transforming the audience through myth, alchemical symbol, and explicit initiation. Orryelle characterizes their work in a similar manner as Hale:

> The MetamOrphic [*sic*] Ritual Theatre Company work and play with breaking down the border (an artifice of theatre as entertainment only) between ritual and theatre, i.e. public rather than private magical rites which are (to varying degrees according to the nature of each production) a combination of pre-meditated/rehearsed and indeterminate spontaneous elements. We recognize the ritualistic roots of drama in (for example) the Rites of Dionysos in Ancient Greece, and seek to return its transformative power, taking 'theatre' beyond its usual bounds of 'pretending' into the realm of Becoming. We don't just act our characters, we Invoke them or related deities and/or archetypes.[29]

Another contemporary occult artist who has found success within a fine art context is Elijah Burgher (1978–). Burgher, who is originally from Chicago and is currently based in Berlin, works primarily as a visual artist who has incorporated performance, sex magic, and idiosyncratic magical symbols into large scale canvases. In 2011, the art magazine *Art21* described one of his performance pieces:

> The artist sites [*sic*] his fascination with ritual and symbol as born out of a queer connection to mysticism through the likes of William Burroughs and Genesis P. Orridge, among others. Although he does not disclose the meaning of the symbols he creates for

28. Carel, "Illuminating Lucifer," 24–33; Allison, "Magick in Theory and Practice"; and Brook, "Puce Modern Moment" especially for discussions of Turner and liminality in Anger's work.
29. Oryelle, "Metamorphic Ritual Theatre."

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> his sigils, he sees his actions as a means of exposing the body and revealing queer desire to transmute societal shame and violence. After Burgher lights candles, mixes his blood with paint and slowly paints a pattern on the canvas on the floor, he carves the same pattern onto his body and then masturbates until he ejaculates on the canvas. He treats the camera as a silent witness, never making direct eye contact or addressing the viewer.[30]

Like Hale, Burgher has exhibited in a variety of high art and museum spaces, including the 2014 Whitney Biennale, LAXART in Los Angeles and Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam. Anger, Oryelle, and Burgher are only a few examples of practitioners who have successfully employed occult practice within the milieu of fine arts as a way of pushing the boundaries of both fine art and the occult, challenging the nature of artistic spaces and the role of the audience. Yet these artists are also, notably, not presenting rituals that belong to any particular occult tradition in artistic venues; thus, although they are practitioners, their ritualized works are not located strictly within a tradition, so they themselves are blurring the lines between religion and art.

The Role of Venue in Interpretation

It can be argued that the venue and framing of Hale's performances within the context of museums and festivals mediates/mitigates the occult content. Context and venue greatly impact the ways in which an audience will receive and understand a performance. Assumptions about how religious rituals work are different than our expectations about secular theater or artistic performances, and despite the intent of the ritualist, the context in which the performance happens does shape and transform the reception. When a sacred performance happens in a secular space, does it transform the secular, as these rites presume, or does it turn the sacred into a spectacle? Museum and festival spaces have their own discourses which shape the content that they contain. Museums carry a particular type of

30. Perel, "Gimme Shelter/Full Frontal."

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objective authority,[31] while festivals cultivate a "time out of time" and create their own sense of liminality within the festival space.[32] It then becomes impossible to interpret a religious performance on its own terms without also taking into account the conventions of the environment in which that performance occurs. Thus, while the ritualist intends to uplift the "mundane" space, the ritual then also becomes subject to the discourses of exhibition.

The fact that Hale's rituals are not easily identifiable as "occult rituals" is very likely a contributing factor to their public acceptance. In fact, many of the elements which Hale might feel characterize a religious ritual also characterize performance in general, as noted above in Beeman's commentary. While Hale draws on identifiable Western esoteric principles, images, and ritual practices, his creative use of technology and media stretches the conception of "ritual," and thus he instead intersects effectively with fine art spaces to the degree that some spectators might only experience the somatic impact or simply enjoy the aesthetic experience. Despite the creation of sacred space and the inclusion of widely recognizable religious expressions such as chanting, these pieces still do not entirely meet the visual expectation of what people would consider a religious ritual. It is likely that the intent of the ritual may not be clear to the audience, if the audience can identify it as a ritual at all. For instance, Hale does not wear any identifiable religious garments during his performance. In other words, if it looked more like what people imagine a "traditional occult" ritual to be and less like performance art, more people might have a different, less positive reaction. The multimedia elements also serve to distance the audience's thoughts from conventional displays of religiosity.

The tradition of public occult ritual performance with which Hale aligns himself was initially structured within wider cultural discourses of public

31. MacDonald, "Exhibitions of Power and Powers of Exhibition," 1–21; King, "Rhetorics in a Museum Space," 671–88.

32. Falassi's *Time Out of Time*, 1–7, provides classic definitions of festival type and space. For recent discussions of festivals as complex economic events, see Hauptfleisch, "Festivals as Eventifying Systems," and Cudny, "The Phenomenon of Festivals," 640–56.

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displays of religion. In the late nineteenth century, occult ritual was performed in a variety of public venues, including theaters and galleries, because the theatrical format had the ability to attract new audiences outside the occult milieu. This sort of evangelizing, however, is not Hale's intent, although the religious content of these performances is very important to him, and he does want an audience to be transformed. While earlier occult performance artists were trying to make occult ideas more accessible, Hale is not. His work is complex and specialized, and there is very little context or mediation provided for his audience. Hale is, however, bringing occult ideas and images into a public space quite comfortably. Certainly the venues that he performs in, art galleries and festivals, provide spaces for widening the public exposure to iconography, key concepts, and ritual forms that are present in Western esotericism and which are often hidden and shared only with people who are actively part of that tradition. So how are these performances most likely to be read by audiences?

Marco Pasi has asserted that one key feature of esoteric art is that it forces an encounter with the oppositional and reactionary, and that these elements form part of the impact of the work.[33] There is no doubt that many people would find elements of Hale's religious expression and his artistic projects to be heretical, and one can comfortably hypothesize that many people would not be comfortable in participating in a ritual designed to invoke demonic forces such as the legions of Beelzebub. However, in this case, there are external discourses of the secular space which construct an additional layer of interpretation to the ritual and which also serve as a comfortable space from which to engage in or witness transgressive religiosity.

The art or festival context of these performances further exotifies a religious tradition that is already socially and culturally marginal, and associated with resistance and opposition. As such, it may be that performances of occult rituals in secular contexts further reinforce the challenging relationship between occult

33. Pasi, "Coming Forth by Night," 106–7.

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practice and religiosity in that audiences are not forced to view them as sacred or religious events. The projection of "heresy" may potentially add to the power of Hale's work for an unfamiliar audience. Aleister Crowley's public ritual performances would certainly have been attempting to subvert conventional morality, not uplift it, and Crowley surely knew that the scandalizing elements of his performances were also powerful for both performers and audience.

However, Hale and his collaborator Scott Barnes disagree with the premise that the reception of occult art relies on the heretical or the fetishized. They note in particular the influence of Theosophy on Modernist art, which, being mainly abstract and lacking explicit representational symbolism, is often still not immediately recognized as having any esoteric content. Hale and Barnes have experienced widespread acceptance in art and festival venues with pieces where they, as artists and ritualists, are extremely open and honest about the work that they are doing. Barnes noted: "I tend to see the work I do with BWH (Barry William Hale) as a very traditional and conservative form of expression. The use of markmaking/ritual object, voice, gesture and available sound making devices to structure performative rituals are some of the most established of human activities."[34] Here, Barnes recalls the "transhistorical" nature of these sorts of expressions which are, he might argue, common to the human experience, regardless of the religious context and therefore resonant as artistic expression. Yet, even if Hale and Barnes do not feel that their work is heretical, Beelzebub is essentially a "heretical" entity and rebellious to his core. However, Hale maintains that occult symbols and rituals are frequently sensationalized and stripped of the religious context, an understanding of which would give them more legitimacy and respect.[35] He feels that esoteric and occult traditions should be more readily acknowledged as part of the spectrum of world religions.

34. Barnes, personal correspondence, September 8, 2015.

35. Hale, personal correspondence, September 8, 2015.

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The Ethnographic Gaze

Hale's work also sits comfortably within the wider context of ethnographic display and performance in that it is a religious performance taking place primarily for non-practitioners outside of a dedicated sacred environment. It may be that this context helps the audience to feel comfortable with challenging material by "Othering" it. Hale has noted the similarities between his performances and environments where other "exotic" (mostly non-Western) rituals are performed for educational purposes. Indeed, Hale and Barnes have already drawn formal similarities between their work and that of other, non-Western traditions, and it may well be that the audience also situates their work in that category. Hale further frames a comparison with a Tantric performance of a Chod rite "in which one imagines dismembering the body and feeding its constituents to the hungry ghosts and beings of other planes."[36] Hale notes that witnessing Chod would be serious and intense for the viewer, but he does not believe that a lack of cultural context impacts the ability of the audience to be transformed by the ritual.[37]

The ethnographic gaze is not absent from fine art spaces, and some artists explicitly incorporate this distancing into their work. In fact, it may be that the increased globalization of the *biennale* as a space for showcasing non-Western and experimental artistic formats, is encouraging a conceptual space for culture-based art which incorporates an anthropological sensibility.[38] As Sassatelli notes, the rising emphasis on *biennale*s as ways to expand the audiences for fine art, is also creating the conditions for a renegotiation of the boundaries of fine art outside of traditionally Eurocentric models.[39] The globalization of these spaces is therefore conducive to the inclusion of immersive experiences that may reference a variety of experiential, cultural, and interpretive systems in the way that Hale's does. For example, the 2017 Venice Biennale had a "Pavilion of the Shamans"

36. Hale, personal correspondence, September 8, 2015.
37. Ibid.
38. Byrne, "Contemporary Art and Globalisation," 169.
39. Sassatelli, "Visual Arts Festivals and Globalisation: The Rise of Biennials," 43–44.

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which included religious performances by indigenous Brazilians and "chill out" areas designed to look like Amazonian ceremonial spaces. Commentators noted that these pieces rehashed primitivism and touched on "noble savagery,"[40] but other art commentators exploring this trend echoed the arguments of Hale and artists before him that these sorts of displays are providing the audiences with primeval experiences that are necessary to balance the alienation of modern life.[41] It is worth noting that, for much of the religiously tinged art using shamanism or non-Western ritual as a device, the anthropological frame of these art pieces contains an antimodernist commentary where ritual is equated with the "primitive" and the non-Western. This is true even when these techniques are used by non-Western artists such as the South Korean artist Park Chan-Kyong (1965–) who references Korean shamanism in his work as a critique against the Korean loss of tradition.[42] This antimodernism, however, is absent from Hale's work. While he uses what he considers to be ancient religious technologies, any "Othering" is not an attempt to specifically invoke the primitive. Instead, he is speaking to the cross-cultural and the comparative.

Performing ritual in secular spaces that are designed for performances and images designated as "art" allows for a cushion of safety and emotional distance for the viewer. The art museum in particular is a constructed space of secular truth and objective viewership. The authority of the art space provides a particular framework for the viewing experience which is rational and contemplative and not intended to be emotionally driven, even though that which is viewed can produce intense emotional responses. As such, challenging and even heretical ideas find protection in the museum because they are to be viewed critically and objectively. Carol Duncan notes that museums are also themselves spaces of liminality and performance where visitors come to ritually perform contemplation within a space of authority. The museum, too, generates its own

40. Davis, "In the Venice Biennale's 'Viva Arte Viva,' Shamanism Sneaks Back Into the Picture."
41. Thackara, "Why Shamanic Practices Are Making a Comeback in Contemporary Art," 2017.
42. Chae, "Park Chan-kyong."

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ideals of transformation, purification, and enlightenment for the visitor.[43] Thus, it shapes and, in some way, confines the experience of a visitor and directs an appropriate relationship with the art or performance being viewed.

If the space for viewing that which is labeled as art is proscribed, how might that shape the relationship between the audience and the occult ritual artist? Does it keep them from questioning or consenting to participation in a ritual that might be objectionable to them? To some degree, yes. Although Hale is open about the nature and meaning of the performance and the rituals that he and Barnes enact, any element which may be considered to be taboo or heretical will be in some sense deflected by the directive of the space to witness and contemplate. Additionally, since Hale's work is "Othered" by the discourses of cultural performance, the audience may not interpret elements in the performance as explicitly heretical. Unlike *Piss Christ,* Andres Serrano's (1950–) "blasphemous" photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in a jar of urine, or other overtly transgressive works with a religious element, the general viewing public may well be more receptive to Hale's works and more responsive to the sensory impact rather than the symbolic content because it is presented as religious experience rather than religious commentary. It is important to reiterate that Hale does not see his work as inherently transgressive. He does not intend to produce offense or shock, yet, it must be acknowledged that the category of "occult" art does naturally suggest heresy, resistance, and a challenging relationship to Western religiosity, so the potential for an interpretative frame of heresy must be confronted.

Hale notes that his work has impacted people from many different backgrounds and walks of life, and attributes this not to the performative qualities, but to the innate ability of esoteric material to move some people: "…it is always surprising who this type of art speaks to, more often than not it is people that you would not expect. I think that it has something to do with how esoteric content touches some cultural archetypal substrate or resonates some chord."[44]

43. Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 20.

44. Hale, personal correspondence, August 11, 2017.

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However, two of his observations regarding audience response were notable. First, Hale commented that some esotericists were critical of his work and disagreed with his using this format to display material they thought should be for the initiated only. Ironically, then, a response grounded in an experience of taboo and heresy came not from outsiders, but from insiders. Second, Hale observes that those who came from religious or spiritual traditions that contained ecstatic elements connected with his performance more heavily.

> [T]here [have] been many examples of people who are more familiar with different cultural traditions because of ethnicity [or prolonged exposure] [who] have had almost a greater context to understand what we are doing through their experiences of spiritual diversity. One such example was that one of the old members of the collective's parent and partner came [to] one of our art gallery performances, and afterwards said words to the effect that they understood finally what we did now, and drew parallels to their exposure in Jerusalem to a variety of ecstatic Hasidic groups. They themselves were children of the secular Jewish generation, well-educated and not religious and I believe it was the context of our material being validated within a high art context that made the whole thing accepted. [45]

This supports the theory that while these ritual performances are, in fact, read as religious performances, the cultural context and signification as "high art" helps predispose the audience to not experience them specifically as "occult rituals." And Hale's and Barnes's emphasis on the "primitive" and cross-cultural elements of ritual technique do, in fact, help provide a comparative context for audiences that may be familiar with them.

Role of the Audience as Ritual Participant

While it can be argued that the venues and frameworks within which Hale performs create the conditions for the audience to be in a dynamic with the performer that is more distanced and contemplative, this is not altogether satisfying. I keep returning to my friend's reaction to Hale's performance and his assertion that his consent was being violated by being witness to or participating in rituals he did not

45. Hale, personal correspondence, September 8, 2015.

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understand. If Hale is explicitly using elements designed to alter the consciousness of the audience, this changes the dynamic between performer and audience. An altered state of consciousness is a common response for an audience member during a performance, but when this is combined with images that are seeding a magical intent for the performer with an intended outcome, to what degree does that make the audience complicit in the magical act? What role does Hale's audience take in these performances, and what sort of transformation is supposed to occur? Is the audience observing, participating, or are they in some way co-ritualists?

Hale acknowledges that this is a challenging question. He is fully aware of the complex and multifaceted role of the audience and the different ways that this sort of ritual may have an impact: an audience member can be a ritual actor, participant, observer, or simply acted upon depending on their background, and also depending on the potency of the moment of performance. He comments that the response to these performances will take place on a number of levels depending on what people bring to the experience. It can be a light show or a profoundly spiritual experience depending on the background of the observer. The question remains, does the active participation, level of belief, and awareness of the audience matter to the reception or the overall efficacy of the rite? Hale believes that these works do, in fact, objectively impact the ineffable, but he mostly places the onus of the efficacy of the ritual onto himself, as he is responsible for ensuring that the operation is completed correctly. In this respect, the audience is constructed as more witness than participant. Hale comments:

> A magical ritual performed in whatever context is still the performance of a magical ritual regardless, and regardless of contextual reading. The ritual possesses its own inherent logic and language, it is prescriptive inasmuch as the elements and procedure are adhered to for its successful deployment. The essential elements must be in place; the construction of the ritual space layout, the ritual procedure is followed, the invocations or incantations are recited and the ritual stages is [*sic*] married with the sonic accompaniment, voice-symbols-movement-gesture-ritual tools or object are utilized, ostensibly all the essential elements are present and ritual is performed. [46]

46. Ibid.

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Hale notes, as with any art, that what the audience brings to it is what they take away from it; however, what may cause someone to be transformed or moved lies in a combination of the position and particular receptivity of the individual and efficacy of the rite:

> I am sure that if someone [from a different religious tradition] was moved to tears at a folk song recited by a shaman [that the difference in tradition] would not have their experience invalidated. [B]ut it would not imply that through this interaction that the ancestors of the shaman weren't reaching out to the heart of a stranger, strumming the cord of universal sorrow. Or it could.[47]

Here, Hale suggests the possibility that the audience response might be the result of an objective change in reality, regardless of the ability of the audience to apprehend it. One notable feature of Hale's art is that the somatic elements of the performance have the potential to impact the physical response of the audience, which may change the relationship of the audience to the performance. This factor takes the audience out of the space of objective contemplative viewer because they are being acted upon by the performer. This raises interesting questions about the power relationship of the performer to the audience and the ability of the audience to be passively and nonconsensually "programmed" by the ritualist with images and intents they do not comprehend. Although, as Beeman notes, a change in consciousness is a natural response to performance; in the case of occult ritual performance there is the explicit aim of introducing the audience to esoteric material while the audience has effectively been "entranced." At some point the question of belief and the audience's understanding of what is occurring becomes relevant. If the audience does not understand the nature and intent of the ritual, or if they are distanced, they may not in any way feel implicated in the ritual or that any issues of consent have been breached. However, if an audience member does have a relationship with this material in some way, they may feel as though they have a larger stake in the outcome of the ritual, and it is possible that

47. Ibid.

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they may feel a potential lack of consent has occurred because they may possess suitable context to be offended by the material or its presentation.

Implications

There are implications for how the rituals and symbols of modern occult traditions are viewed and interpreted, depending on the contexts in which they are displayed. Although Hale is effectively bringing some very esoteric ideas and symbols to a new audience through performing in art and festival venues, he is still not performing religious rituals that are actually embedded within a tradition, and it is very likely that such rituals would feel out of place in those venues. The combination of esoteric material with non-ritual elements helps to provide ballast for the esoteric material that makes it acceptable. Elements that appeal to the audience's understanding and reception of comparative religious material, such as chanting and the display of religious symbols, also provide a context for people to experience Hale's art as a religious expression.

But can Hale be successful in his desire to introduce occult material to a wider audience *and* to help better position the "Western occult tradition" within the world's religious traditions? There may be more potential for the former than the latter. Because of the quality of Hale's work, he can secure prominent artistic and festival venues which absolutely provide excellent opportunities for exposure. However, without greater context for the audience it is unclear the degree to which they will position this material as part of the wider religious landscape. Regardless of this, given the immersive and somatic qualities of the work, the audience will likely be moved, and they may be inspired to investigate the traditions further.

Conclusions

There is no culturally defined space for the public performance—or even acknowledgment—of rituals from the Western occult tradition. Customarily, sacred spaces that are created by and used by occultists are highly secretive,

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primarily because occult traditions are either considered to be operating outside of conventional religious practice or are only open to selected initiates. Additionally, with the exception of Freemasonry, most groups and individuals working within these traditions are normally not operating from any sort of publicly accessible or known temple space. As a result, the general public's exposure to any occult material is likely to be accidental, and may be treated as taboo and dangerous. Occult ritual performance puts the audience into the position of voyeur rather than participant, regardless of personal relationship to this material. While these may be public performances, their impact relies partially on witnessing that which is normally private, and that itself can produce an unsettled effect for the viewer. Ritual performance art offers the opportunity to observe a very intimate and rare activity, even when the effects are supposed to be experienced widely.

Barry William Hale's art is remarkably complex. He knows where he situates his work historically as a ritualist and an artist, and he has clarity about the ways in which his ritual performance can and does inspire viewers. As a magician, he is confident about his ability to effectively enact a ritual operation regardless of the perspective or background of the audience. Ironically, despite the generally heretical character of both occult material and of Hale's work specifically, the people who may have the most challenging response are the insiders who have the ability to make the most informed commentaries about the cultural context of the ritual practice. Indeed, occult practitioners may be generally less informed about the wider artistic milieu in which Hale's work is situated, and therefore experience the pieces more as "ritual" and less as art. Yet since another of Hale's intended outcomes is to broaden the cultural repertoire of occult practitioners, he has the potential to expand the horizons of his audiences in a variety of directions, and regardless of their relationship to this material, no one should go unmoved.

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