

The “Cultic” and Secular Epic Art: Modernity’s Priests, Carol Duncan, Angelica Mesiti, and the Great White Space

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Abstract

This article considers two examples of contemporary art practice, their use of ritual and the secular-cultic deployment of this ritual. To do this, it will propose an original analysis based on a “cultic” paradigm to examine the framing, placement, and impact of this art – one that delineates creative production through the genre of the epic and the conditions of secular Modernity. Two compelling examples of video/installation art by the Australian artist Angelica Mesiti (1976–) will be deployed. It will suggest that the “secular” settings of this art enable the emotive and ontological use of secular gallery space, and that this legitimises several secular-sacred ultimate concerns. The “cultic” analysis used here will be drawn from the theories and methodologies of Carol Duncan in her examination of art and the secular. It will extend her thinking to fully examine the use of the “cultic” as managed by the official systems to reinforce the state’s totalising claims to authenticity.

Keywords:

Atmospheres, Religion and Contemporary Art, Epic, Angelica Mesiti, Carol Duncan, the Cultic, Art Gallery of New South Wales

Introduction

Speculation on contemporary art practice need not necessarily be a *pressing* concern of the scholar of new religions. In this research, however, I seek to examine two examples of contemporary art production by one artist in order to examine how this art is used by the state in a “cultic” way. What follows is no study of the unquestionably religious; rather, it is set on the fringes of this field. This should enable us to better examine some of the terms we use in our methodological approaches to the secular as a “religious-but-not-religious” space. Thus, I will focus on artefacts, atmospheres, and behaviors that are not regularly taken to be religious, cult-like, or cultic. Working with examples (that remain “questionably”

religious) will provide me with the chance to better examine how our concepts of religion and the cultic are constructed and compromised by the ongoing conditions of Modernity. I will use two outstanding examples of video art from the Australian artist Angelica Mesiti.¹ I make this choice not because Mesiti simply *does* art. Rather, I will demonstrate here how she maintains a particular talent for working in an “Epic” genre – making a style of art that reflects on narrational and highly emotive dimensions of Modernity and the national. This places her creative work in a particular category of practice that affords her art a special use for the Modern, secular, public art gallery. It is in this atmosphere that the “cultic” dimensions of art can be most fully explored. The purpose of this essay is then, at the end, to make a more complete assessment of how we can speak of the “cultic” (and the religious) as an operational dimension of the secular.

Terms and Methodology

“Cultic”, although it appears in the title of this journal, is not commonly used in English. It points directly to “cult” – a word that scholars of new religions and high-demand groups shy away from. The debate is long and well known, but “cult” comes with a pejorative use in the popular media and operates as a category that seeks to reserve deviance and even criminality for the field of “new” or less official religious activity – when of course the link between deviance, faith, and criminality can be found quite easily in old and official religions as much as in the new. *The Oxford English Dictionary* simply says of “cultic” that it pertains to a religious cult.² But as an adjective, “cultic” does lift itself away from the “cult” debate somewhat. Moreover, both “cult” and “cultic” carry a shadow of the French *culte* – which less pejoratively indicates ritual action and worship more than it refers to novel power structures and charismatically based institutions. *Culte* is also evocative of a τέμενος (*temenos*). A τέμενος (*temenos*) required a particular action or respect as one approached it, but the space did not necessarily require those who crossed its boundaries to understand a complex theology or dogma, meet a priest, or acknowledge a guardian institution. It was a space that existed in opposition to more ritualized and urbanized spaces. Colin Campbell developed the concept of “cultic milieu” under the tone of this institutional informality.³ His term points to a more vernacular series of spaces and groups, more likely to operate *underground* or well outside the given expectations of the religious mainstream. This is what I take “cultic” to be in this research, but in a secular, Modern mode, it describes something much more than just an oppositional practice. As a sub-culture, Campbell’s “cultic” movements present alternatives and challenges to both the status quo and the power assumptions which manifest within a particular society’s accepted worldview. This is why, in their study of Campbell, Kaplan and Lööw speak of these less formal groups as “oppositional” subcultures.⁴ This brings me to the heart of what I am investigating here: can

¹ Angelica Mesiti, “Angelica Mesiti Official Site,” n.d., accessed December 1, 2025, <http://www.angelicamesiti.com>.

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second, vol. 4, ed. J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Clarendon Press, 1989), under “Cultic.”

³ Colin Campbell, “The Cult, The Cultic Milieu, and Secularization,” *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972).

⁴ Jeffrey Kaplan and Hel’ene Lööw, eds., *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of*

we link the idea of an “oppositional” subculture to a state-funded institution, and if we can, what does this mean for Modern secularity?

This article will be, then, guided by the question: what is it that the “oppositional” cultic milieu actually opposes? If we use a Marxist paradigm, we might say it opposes “established power structures” or the “prevailing hegemony”. This may be, but the “status quo” in Modern democratic systems is a subtle, multifaceted manifestation of power and compromise. The state certainly retains the right to deploy the blatant use of legal force, sometimes even fatal force against its citizens when needed, but often the Modern state seeks to create a totalizing response for its citizens – one that always aims to amplify and reinforce its authority and authenticity. This totalizing response means that while there might be oppositional subcultures (Campbell’s cultic milieu), these more fringe cultures are met by the “oppositional” cultic actions of the state itself. If this “oppositional” response did not happen, then the claims of the state would not be total. Here I differ from the work done by Martha Nussbaum. In her great project of examining (and seeking to make more impactful and useful) the political emotions of Modernity, she conceives of the state as a collective project where citizens seek to engage with the republic at multiple levels, including the deeply emotional.⁵ I think her approach is mostly sound, but there is a naivety here as well. Her thinking, however, raises a tension between the affective labor of the state and the affective projects of oppositional subcultures, a tension that Nussbaum approaches from a different but illuminating angle. As we will see with Duncan, when we come to the political uses of the state-funded gallery, significant late-Feudal and aristocratic models are rolled over into Modernity for the sake of the continued prestige of the state’s authority. This is done in a way that *compels* the citizen to recognize the legitimacy of prevailing power structures at various emotional levels *despite* the rational and democratic contributions citizens might collectively make to the life of their polity.

In her *Civilizing Rituals* (2010), Duncan gives a particular history of the rise of the state-sponsored secular art gallery.⁶ She begins with showing how this idea develops from the princely *Wunderkammers* that emerged in European courts from the 1600s onwards. In these displays of artefacts and art, the local prince was able to demonstrate his taste and refinement, and, by extension, declare his authenticity as a ruler on aesthetic and emotive levels. These princely collections added to the ruler’s prestige and his legitimacy – particularly to those courtiers and genteel members of the middle classes who were granted invitations to these ostensibly private royal collections. Duncan traces this prestige-granting cultural machinery as it applies to the developing secular state. Not surprisingly, one part of the republican legitimacy sought by revolutionaries in France after 1789 was founded when they converted the Louvre Palace into the world’s first state-funded public gallery. She writes:

In a relatively short time, the Louvre’s directors (drawing partly on Italian and German precedents) worked out a whole set of practices that came to characterize art

Globalization (AltaMira Press, 2002).

⁵ Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁶ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (Routledge, 2010).

museums everywhere. In short, the museum organized its collections into art-historical schools and installed them so as to make visible the development and achievement of each school.⁷

Of this trend, more recent examples abound where the state art gallery gives the impression of aesthetic and historical arbiter on behalf of its citizens. The gallery is also a guardian of the precious and the sacred things of the state.⁸ These objects certify the national story. To pick another example, and sticking with France, let us consider how the celebration of the “epic” destiny of the state and its precious things was utilized by the power structure. We can note the work done by the restoration monarch Louis-Philippe (r. 1830–1848). He transmogrified numerous galleries at Versailles into a public museum which celebrated “all the glories of France.” This included numerous exhibits extolling the exceptional character and achievements of Napoleon and the First French Empire. In this way, the Orleans monarch rested an amount of his legitimacy upon his role as custodian of the legacy of those national leaders who preceded him (including one from the competing house of Bonaparte).⁹ Such uses of the museum and the gallery lay bare the political uses of authority after the public gallery became a part of the Western experience. Galleries, however, can also be more subtle in their affective emotive experiences and in the legitimacy they grant.

Duncan examines the modern reality of what gallery spaces mean and focuses on their ritual aspects carried out in and around what she calls the “great white boxes” of the gallery. Here she is referring to those spaces in the gallery in which permanent displays are set and sometimes rearranged, but more importantly she is interested in those spaces where temporary exhibitions are regularly erected, advertised, and, after some time, packed away again. These temporary exhibitions create an “event” of note in the ritual year of the state and bring new focus to particular aspects of what the state is able to aesthetically present and the ritual experiences that go with them. So it is into these boxes that the learned and priest-like technicians of the state’s collected treasures (i.e. professional curators), arrange and rearrange exhibitions of artefacts for maximum affective impact. These are the “civilizing rituals” of her study’s title. She concludes:

The museum’s ritual program and mass advertising imply each other. Together, they construct a new individualist self, one which exists at the centre of a boundless, a-social universe that is both spiritual and material. In the cult of high art, this self strives for spiritual, implicitly male, purity by transcending the limited and finite material world.... In the museum’s liminal space, the modern soul can know itself as above, outside of, and even against the values that shape its existence.¹⁰

In light of this work, I propose that we can now see a concatenation of rituals taking place

⁷ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 24.

⁸ Zoe Alderton, “The Secular Sacred Gallery: Religion at Te Papa Tongarewa,” in *Secularisation: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Christopher Hartney (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

⁹ The life of this preservation of Bonaparte’s prestige had an interesting afterlife, for after the very brief interregnum of the Second Republic, the House of Orleans was replaced by Napoleon III.

¹⁰ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 131–132.

throughout the life of the Modern polity. The first level of action is the slow ritual of selecting, commissioning, and appropriating the storehouse of artefacts that may be displayed by the state in its galleries. The second ritual level is the curatorial preparation of the displays and exhibitions into ideal pathways of thematic comprehension in these “white boxes.” Here, the ordering of various objects and the research and narration created to frame them demonstrates the care and insight the state applies to the preservation and comprehension of the objects so gathered for exhibitions. This is often completed with an ideal movement in mind as a viewer will pass through the exhibition. Then come the advertising campaigns that announce a new ritual line has been established in the gallery. When an exhibition opens – there is an imagined “ritual” path that viewers will take as they move through the displays – here is the third level of ritualization. Then we come to the ultimate level of ritual, which I want to concentrate on below. In some cases, there is a fourth level of ritual. It may be that the objects on display will relate to or seek to replicate cultic ritual activity themselves. This is the case with the two artefacts chosen as examples here.

In these ways, the Modern state creates its own cultic behaviors to emotionally, ritualistically, and religiously confirm its own authenticity. From this proposition we should consider, as we proceed, the following problematic: as the “status quo”, can the Modern state engage in “cultic” behavior if that behavior is deemed “official”? Here I will argue yes, but as we will see, this “yes” comes with a confronting sub-clause in the Modern social contract.

Any “cultic” action of the state cannot be directly addressed as religious because of compelling legal reasons. In Modern nations such as Australia and the United States (and no doubt many others), it may be calamitous to assert that the state carries out its own cultic and religious activities – given that such activities are expressly forbidden by various Modern constitutions. This sub-clause will then present the scholar of religions with his or her first hurdle: that those who participate in the cultic behavior of the state are probably the first to deny its cultic nature and are paid (with wages) to deny it. Moreover, it is the implied duty of the scholar of religion to academically substantiate those constitutional clauses that make this distinction. In the way we define religion as scholars, we also maintain categories laid out in the Modern constitution. Fitzgerald has argued that recent definitions of religion, and the activity of religious studies, do nothing but reinforce constructed Modern categories that obscure political and economic realities by singling out a “non-political” and “non-economic” activity which gets labelled “religion”. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald misses the import of the legal reality.¹¹ In Australia, it is Clause 116 of the Commonwealth Constitution that compels the state to abstain from establishing a national religion. In the United States, there is both the First Amendment, and Document 1828 of the Inland Revenue Service that confirms this. It follows that if I expand my definition of religion to encompass “official” cultic activity, an unconstitutional breach is suddenly highlighted.

Therefore, can the religious rituals of state can be excused as simply “cultic” – so that (forgetting the Classical Greek example of a τέμενος and the cultic requirements of being in

¹¹ Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

that space) such things are not really religious? For when we look at Australia, we quickly find a cultic activity that also operates as my nation's most successful new religion. It is found in the sacred spaces, worship systems, memorial temples, and annual rituals we officially make to commemorate our war dead.¹² When, however, I came together earlier this year with a number of scholar-colleagues to plan out a monograph for the history of new religions in Australia, collectively we agreed to leave out the study of this national cult. Is it a new religion? I would strongly argue that it is. Yet because it is an *official* state cult, it really does not fit the themes of challenging innovation, deviancy, social renewal, and unofficial fringe existence that determine the category of new religions in Australia. It is, we might say, constitutionally off the radar.

Now that we have turned this examination of the cultic into a question of “official” and “oppositional” ritual behavior, let us apply this to the operation of the state gallery. We have already seen how the cultic milieu encompasses more oppositional movements. I suggest here the “cultic” also includes official and state-managed ritual action – actions that reinforce authority structures – so that now we thus find ourselves in a system where the state takes part in cultic behaviors while simultaneously denying a connection to any official religious activity. State-funded art galleries don't come with their own theologies, but they clearly play with ritual and affect. And we can see this in the following analysis of Mesiti's works as artefacts that embody ritual and generate official affect.

The first of her works I discuss was displayed in 2009 as one of the finalists for an Australian religious art prize.¹³ It was quickly acquired by the (state-owned) Art Gallery of New South Wales – which is the context in which I explore it here. The second art work was commissioned by the same gallery in January 2020 and developed to its installation at the end of 2024.¹⁴

Rapture (Silent Anthem)

This is a 10'10"-long piece of video art that made news upon its first display in 2009. It was the first work of video art to win the Blake Prize for Religious Art – a well-known national art prize. I encountered *Rapture* in an exhibition curated at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2013. The exhibition was entitled *We Used to Talk About Love*.¹⁵ The video was playing on a screen suspended by wires in space as if hovering by its own power four feet

¹² Ken Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Melbourne University Press, 2008); Christopher Hartney, “States of Ultimacy and the Cult of the Dead Soldier: The ANZAC Tradition, The Secularisation Paradigm, The Charisma of Materiality, and Civil Religion as It Is Embodied in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra,” in *Secularisation: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Christopher Hartney (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014); Zoe Alderton and Christopher Hartney, “ANZAC Celebration During the COVID 19 Pandemic: Observations from Fieldwork in Katoomba, New South Wales,” *Fieldwork in Religion* 16, no. 1 (2021): 8–34.

¹³ Zoe Alderton, “The Limits of Taste: Politics, Aesthetics, and Christ in Contemporary Australia,” *Literature and Aesthetics* 21, no. 2 (2011): 65–93.

¹⁴ Art gallery of New South Wales, ed., *Angelica Mesiti: The Rites of When [Exhibition, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 21 September 2024–11 May 2025]* (Art Gallery NSW, 2024).

¹⁵ <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/we-used-to-talk-about-love/>, See also: Natasha Bullock (ed): *We Used to Talk About Love*, (Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2013).

above the floor. The room was white, and a single wooden bench invited some of the viewers close to the screen to sit and watch. What appeared on the screen in a loop could be described in the following manner:

A fade from whites to colours slowly takes place on the screen. Faces begin to appear, young faces. It is as if the forms of their existence are drawn out of a summer haze. The eyes of the youths are wide and locked into something devotional that is just ahead of them. What we lack is any kind of frame for where or how these faces may be in the world. What entrances them? Over the 10 minutes of video, we never see what they see. We only see that they are focused on the same point. Their faces and their eyes move in slow motion. It is a cinematic style that has recently been excessively used to signal moments of grave and sometimes cosmic import. A form of narration is implied by the lack of context – if we keep watching, perhaps a dénouement will allow us a frame, a context. This never comes. The eyes of these youths are upward-focused and adoring, they are rhythmically nodding – their action intimates music, or ritual, or both, but the watcher of the video hears nothing. The slow motion of the action gives the video an aura of rapture or of drugged timelessness. Additionally, because of a lack of reference we are excluded from their rapture. We remain outside observers. Thus, these faces become “sacred” at the very least in the Latin meaning of that word (“sacredos”) – as something set apart. This exclusion of the audience from any connection of these faces to the “seen thing” is something that images at a regular speed would emphasise less.

Through various scenes, there is a kind of spray washing over the screen – is it mist? – sweat? – something tangible invades the ether. The crowd seems to be reveling in its joyous power, as Canetti has it, so that although the camera may focus on particular individuals, it is their existence in the corporate nature of the crowd and their fascination that also fascinates us.¹⁶ The slow motion provides the viewer with the details of each eye movement, each point at which each face seems to focus and refocus on whatever it is they are watching. Mouths open, sudden manifestations of intense happiness burst across the faces shown. Then there is a white-out. It suggests that sun, heat, and water have overwhelmed the capacities of the camera to capture something. Then images return from the white-out. We refocus on the mouth of a young girl; her teeth are interlaced with braces. She is screaming, but then her mouth falls into a broad and satisfying smile. She is screaming but all the time, silence fills the gallery room.

One of the final scenes has a group of boy-men leaping on the spot; their actions seem tribal, their mouths chanting lyrics or incantations. Wet hair, heads thrown back in screams of delight which we cannot hear (Keats: *Ode on a Nightingale*, ‘the unheard song is sweetest?’). Their eyes, as with every face in this video, focus on the one particular spot, as if just off screen is some miraculous moment, and we, the audience, look for this too. Their trance-like eyes bulge at what they see, and yet, like every other face we have watched, they remain always unaware of the camera – so that we look at them as though we are hidden by

¹⁶ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (Noonday Press, 1998).

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a veil. In confronting the life erupting ecstatically on this screen, we find ourselves on the wrong side of death as all this life pours out before us.

A long, perhaps parting, shot on a single face, watching in powerful expectation. Then more boys leaping, half-elegant, half-beastly, animalistic, ecstatic, Bacchic? Their faces are packed together, they brush against each other in a delirium – the slow motion seems to make their bodies uncontrollable. This sense of the ecstatic, however, is framed by a staid and official gallery. The contained and dispassionate viewers around me give no reaction. Does this help to fuel the nation-authorizing cultic functions of this gallery space?

In this way, *Rapture* demonstrates how unofficial ecstatic practices can be absorbed into the ritual architecture of the state gallery. Its affective intensity becomes permissible because it is mediated through curatorial authority, allowing the institution to host quasi-ritual experience while still affirming its secular credentials.

The Expanding Nature of the Art Gallery of New South Wales

Naala Nura (Country Facing)

Before I go on, I should note that between this 2013 exhibition of *Rapture* and the 2024 debut of *The Rites of When*, the state gallery, which is the site of the display of both artworks, was substantially expanded into two complexes. The original building of the Art Gallery of New South Wales opened in 1911 and has only recently been given the specific indigenous name “Naala Nura”. This was on 16 April 2024, when its companion building came online. The portico of this first building resembles an ancient Greek temple. The original section is constructed externally of sandstone and contains long formal galleries. All of this is windowless.

Entering the main door requires going around a chicane that ensures no external natural light or noise can enter too far inside the galleries. The lighting and the climate are strictly controlled. All the spaces have CCTV cameras installed, and security guards mill constantly around the artworks. The building sits on prime city real estate on the edge of a city park (“The Domain”). On the far side of this park is the state parliament, the courts, and the legal quarter, and beyond this the central business district of Sydney. To the immediate north of this building, we find the city’s botanical gardens and the harbor. The building was expanded extensively at its rear in the lead-up to 1970 to celebrate the bicentennial of Captain James Cook’s arrival in Botany Bay. All these elements – from the building’s position, to its Classical look, to its climate control, to its security features – declare that it is an “official” space. What sets it apart from its neighboring gallery is that Naala Nura is able to display art that has been made with domestic spaces in mind. It is an impressive building, but it can easily accommodate the kind of small art one might have at home.

Naala Badu (Sea Facing)

This new complex is not so much an extension to the original building but a completely new stand-alone building. It has been placed on land that borders the botanical gardens to the north. Naala Badu is distinguished from the original building by its glass construction and

by the fact that most of it is built under the headland of Woolloomooloo Bay. The spaces here require a larger art than would be housed in a domestic space. It requires, in fact, a huge art that only the richest individuals and corporations of government could acquire, store, and display. This is most evident in the basement of the new building. Naala Badu is founded upon what was previously a vast hidden oil reservoir. This was built for navy use during World War II. This great empty cistern had 125 concrete columns supporting the building above. It is a space evocative of the Basilica Cistern in Istanbul (although the Sydney version is redolent of the scent of crude oil). It has 2,200 square meters in floorspace, with walls that are seven meters tall. It is known as “The Tank”. It was in The Tank that several floor-to-ceiling screens were set up to display Mesiti’s *The Rites of When* (hereafter “*Rites*”), a 34-minute immersive video experience. Unlike the mostly glass building above it, The Tank can be rendered so lightless that it is hard to see where one is walking. On the day that I experienced this artwork, the screens of Mesiti’s video art were the only source of light here.

The Rites of When

Unlike *Rapture*, which was displayed on one large but human-relatable screen in the old building, in The Tank, *Rites* was displayed on multiple seven-meter-tall screens around the space. Because of the pillars, there was no perfect space where the viewer could see every image at once, and the viewer was required to walk about – forming their own ritual paths as they went. The giant screens in this gargantuan darkness were presenting beautiful slow camera moves. Often an image would begin on one screen and pass slowly to the others, being replaced by new images on the first screen. When I entered, multiple images of snow-covered pine forests were being broadcast. Given that outside the gallery, Sydney sweltered in an intense summer heat, these initial images dramatically marked a change in realities between The Tank and the city around it. I was overwhelmed by a sense that these images were from the far north of the northern hemisphere. I felt geographically displaced, yet newly cool.

A running plan outside The Tank described how these scenes were laid out.

Prelude: Celestial Nebula

First Movement: Hibernial Solstice: The Longest Night

- I. Winter Geometries
- II. Procession
- III. Grand Dance
- IV. Bonfire
- V. Effigy

Reprise: Celestial Nebula

Second Movement: Aestival Solstice: The Longest Day

- VI. Summer Harvest
- VII. Solstice

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VIII. Weather Makers

IX. Ecstatic Collectivity

Here is not the place to give a fully detailed description of this artwork. I hope it will suffice to put instead my field note descriptions of my first experience of the work:

4 January 2025. (After the snow-forest scenes) 7-meter-high human figures move in procession. They shunt from ritual movement into dance. This dance is like ritual movement. There is a beauty and a certainty in the movement of these 7-metre high figures. There is a choreographed knowing in the bodies as though they regularly deploy these steps. After some time concentrating only on the figures themselves, it becomes clear that they are dancing around a fire. An effigy is brought forward and burnt in what seems ritual offering (an observer has made the comparison to Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man*, 1973).¹⁷ Then a celestial nebula explodes across all screens. Is this a reset of the chronology of the narrative/seasons?

Suddenly great aerial views of a combine harvester slowly mowing the grain of a great wheat field are shown. It is harvest time. Again – a reminder of the knowledges of natural time that urban humans mostly miss.

Then there are “weather-maker” scenes – these are the most beguiling. The finger-clicks of the ritual dancers slowly turn into applause, then into ritual thigh-slapping – all of it like a storm coming on, and rain pelting down. Flourishing is now the theme? And then a wild dance to celebrate being itself – one where we celebrate knowledge of full granaries and a certain future.

The editing is complex, but seamless. The ritualists move from one great screen to another around and around the space as if in procession. As the audience we watch them from an imagined centre. Everyone on these huge screens is greater, grander, bigger.

The music is precisely composed and edited to bring on wonder and ecstasy. This goes to demonstrate Mesiti as one of the great magi of Australian ecstasy and epic. In this experience of the art I was part-blissed out, but not fully in ecstasy.

Of her ritual intent, Mesiti says:

I feel like our hyper-capitalist, Western, urban, technological way of living has led us adrift. And so with this work, I was making a quasi-science fiction, utopian, speculative adventure about our out-of-sync world. What would it look like if we made up new rituals and communal activities for the present that were about trying to realign with natural cycles? These ideas are what the title of the

¹⁷ H.R. Hyatt-Johnston, “A Darker, Clearer Sky,” Artist Profile, n.d., accessed November 30, 2025, <https://artistprofile.com.au/a-darker-clearer-sky/>.

work is reaching towards.¹⁸

Here we can see that an oppositional cultic milieu is developing, allowing Mesiti to give us a new sense of ritual. What sets her aims apart from Colin Campbell's, however, is that this "oppositional" and "underground" response to the prevailing technological inevitabilities of Modernity are in fact commissioned, funded, and displayed by the state. Mesiti makes clear the intense religious dimensions of her structure and source material for this overwhelming experience. It is an experience included in the totalizing claims of Modernity, but its religious impact is mollified by its artistic and its gallery framing. Within Duncan's schema, *Rites of When* demonstrates how the "great white box" can host ritual behavior without ever naming it as such. Its choreographies, processions, and seasonal mythos produce an unmistakably cultic form of experience that the institution contains, neutralizes, and ultimately incorporates into its official narrative of cultural legitimacy. In this way, the Modern state can include the cultic and maximize its affective appeal over the populace. The "underground" is included in the mainstream, the oppositional cultic milieu does not oppose, and the secular state continues as a religious/not-religious entity.

Mesiti and Epic

When examining *Rapture* and *Rites*, it seems clear that some manifestation of a ritual dimension of the religious is being captured and broadcast to visitors inside a secular gallery space. These works show that the divide between oppositional cultic practice and official state ritual is far more porous than our secular frameworks admit. I have showed *Rapture* to numerous classes (without any framing and who had not seen it before). Many guess that the video is being recorded at some kind of religious revivalist youth or Pentecostal youth meeting.¹⁹ They note that there is an ecstatic (albeit unheard) singing that must be taking place. The youths in the video are mouthing words as if joined in a common chant. In *Rites* there are clearly soundtrack and ritual sounds (the finger clicking and slapping) evident. In both instances, genuine worship could be taking place – but Mesiti refuses to give us the full context of what may be really happening.

These video works (and others she has completed) show Mesiti playing with the genre of epic. This is a hard genre to precisely define, and it relates more often than not to literature than to high art production.²⁰ But epic is able to link the values of a particular peoples to narratives of significant affect and actions that seek to compel large-group coherence.²¹ Peter Sloterdijk has sought to examine this through his various philosophical ruminations

¹⁸ Art gallery of New South Wales, *Angelica Mesiti: The Rites of When [Exhibition, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 21 September 2024–11 May 2025]*, 114.

¹⁹ Indeed, because it was shown to them by academics from a religious studies department in that department, their responses can be influenced by the framing of *Rapture* in that instance. The point here is that it is easy to consider *Rapture* as a video that captures a religious service.

²⁰ See for example: Catherine Bates, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521880947>.

²¹ The close to the kind of "grand narrative" which Lyotard feels has gone missing from Western society. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester Univ. Pr, 2005).

on the greater structures that hold nations and civilizations together.²² The mix in Mesiti's work between extreme emotion and ritual action begin these work's claim to inclusion in the epic genre, the way they are used in official buildings with particular narrative uses confirms it.

Conclusions

In both works then, there is a powerful emotive and experiential dimension at work behind the ritual actions displayed on screen. It is an affective power put into the video by Mesiti, and she has done much to transfer this power to her audiences. Similarly, the Modern priest/technicians/curators of the gallery who commissioned *Rites* back in 2020 specifically to be sited in The Tank are hoping this emotional affectivity will be immersively experienced by those visiting the gallery. What these technicians will not do is claim that the state directly endorses the celebration of religious emotion. Constitutionally this would be a bridge too far. What these technicians are able to *officially* do, however, is contract Mesiti to do *something* in the space. Based on her previous work (for example *Rapture*), they might guess that her commissioned installation would be cultic, but they can deny responsibility for what it eventually becomes. Nussbaum hints at this in her analysis of two substantial national (and epic) poets. She says of Walt Whitman's emotive contribution to American dissent and stability as well as Rabindranath Tagore's similar emotive contribution to India and Bangladesh that

...the space for subversion and dissent should remain as large as is consistent with civil order and stability... [one way of addressing] these worries is for the state to offer ample space for artists to offer their own different visions of key political values. Whitman and Tagore are much more valuable as free poets than they would be as hired acolytes of a political elite, Soviet style.²³

In this way Mesiti is valuable to secular Australia. She is a "free" agent creatively, and yet what the state is willing to purchase from her (*Rapture*) and commission from her (*Rites*) has a clear cultic dimension that helps seal the deal. It is a cultic activity that can be put at arm's length from the state through the technical professionalism of their cadre of curators. Nussbaum in her quote above may speak of "political values" alone, but it is clear in the examples she uses of Whitman (and his poem *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed*) and Tagore (and his poem *Amar Shonar Bangla*) that these statements of secular political values are showered in a totalizing emotive impact that makes them also deeply religious and epic – but additionally in a cultic sense. It is clear that through Mesiti's artefacts, secular society facilitates and condones (1) the powerful experiential and emotional outpourings of captured in their contents and (2) ability of the state to turn its official site, for example, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, into something that *contains* the cultic. The analysis reworks Campbell's cultic milieu by showing that the state has developed its own parallel

²² Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes* (Semiotext(e), 2011); Kenny Selamatan, "Playing With Spheres: Preliminary Sketches on the Use of Peter Sloterdijk as Methodologist in the Study of Religion" (Honours Thesis, University of Sydney, 2025).

²³ Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, 7.

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milieu in which ritualized affect is produced, curated, and legitimized. In this way the totalizing claims to authenticity made by the state give out experiences of high religious emotion, but strictly on the state's own secular terms. What emerges from this is a need for a broader account of religion that recognizes how modern states curate their own forms of ritual intensity, not only at the cultic margins of society but at its highly funded and authorizing cultural center.

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