



The Construction of Emotional Rituals: Design Turn of Art Installations at Music Festivals from the Perspective of Interaction Ritual Chain Theory

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Abstract. Contemporary music festivals have evolved from single-stage performances into complex fields integrating diverse cultural experiences and deep social interactions. As a core element of spatial construction, art installations play an irreplaceable role in reinforcing ritual atmospheres, guiding collective interactions, and catalyzing emotional resonance. However, current installation design generally exhibits tendencies of prioritizing technology over emotion and the individual over the collective, mostly focusing on visual spectacles and individual sensory stimulation, while lacking systematic consideration of group interaction and emotional cohesion. This makes it difficult for audiences to form lasting emotional memories and group identity. How to elevate installations from "visual embellishment" to "emotional ritual generator" has become a core issue demanding urgent resolution. Based on interaction ritual chain theory, this study explores the design turn and strategies for art installations at music festivals.

Keywords: Interaction Ritual Chain, Emotional Design, Music Festival, Art Installation

1 Introduction

In recent years, with the deepening of cultural and tourism integration strategies, the music festival industry has shown a vigorous development trend. Its internal consumption logic and spatial attributes have gradually evolved from single entertainment consumption venues into "emotional compensation" spaces where young people seek psychological comfort, release pent-up emotions, and rebuild social connections ^[1]. Music festivals create high-density emotional interaction scenes through music, art installations, interactive rituals, and other forms, constructing a collective field of emotional resonance, enabling strangers to quickly establish emotional bonds and temporarily forget life's worries and anxieties. This shared emotional experience integrates individual emotional fluctuations into collective revelry, achieving a "spiritual massage" effect, helping young people release pressure and restore mental energy ^[2].

As a core element of spatial creation and interaction guidance at music festivals, the role of art installations is shifting from mere "decorative background" to "core experiential content." Early music festival art installations mostly focused on visual spectacles and static displays, with a clear boundary between the audience as "viewers" and the installations as "viewed objects." Although this one-way aesthetic model could bring temporary visual impact, it struggled to stimulate deep emotional investment and lasting memory retention, often reducing installations to mere backdrops for photo-taking, lacking genuine vitality. With the intervention of new media technologies and interaction design, the limitations of physical space have been broken, granting art installations the ability to perceive, provide feedback, and generate. The audience transforms from passive onlookers into active participants. However, installation design often focuses on individual-level sensory stimulation and operational feedback, neglecting the essential nature of music festivals as collective fields: transforming the "simultaneous presence" of individuals into a "shared co-presence" of the group, and elevating transient emotional fluctuations into lasting emotional energy. This is precisely the core value of integrating interaction ritual chain theory into installation design.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Review of Research on Art Installations at Music Festivals

Music experience is regarded in many theoretical studies as a "positive self-shaping resource." Music provides opportunities for psychological growth and unique personal experiences, both of which contribute to the construction of self-identity, and such opportunities can be obtained during music festival performances^[3].

The integration of art installations with music festivals did not begin at a specific moment, but rather is a process of gradual evolution over nearly a century. From early music festivals' experiments with stage sets to contemporary large-scale art installations becoming the core experiential content of music festivals, this evolutionary trajectory reflects the functional transformation of music festivals from "auditory consumption" to "full-sensory experience."

The connection between music festivals and art installations can be traced back to early 20th-century Europe. In 1946, the small Austrian town of Bregenz, after World War II, had to use two ships on Lake Constance as a temporary stage due to the destruction of its theater. This forced move unexpectedly initiated a signature tradition of the Bregenz Festival. Since then, the lake view has become a core component of the stage. Subsequently, to help audiences intuitively understand the opera content, the stage was designed each year according to the opera's theme, gradually forming a unique visual style of "one opera, one set."

In the 1980s, art installations began to move from a subsidiary position as stage sets to the core of music festivals. In 1986, Burning Man was born in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. This event, with its tenets of "community awareness" and "artistic freedom of expression," attracts art enthusiasts from around the world to gather and collaboratively build installation works. At Burning Man, art installations are the central carrier of the

festival, holding equal importance to musical performances, even becoming ritual symbols that transcend music. During the closing ceremony, the large wooden humanoid sculpture in the center of the city is set ablaze, marking the climax of Burning Man. Since 2009, Coachella has invited global artists annually to create giant sculptures, interactive structures, and light art that are both visually impactful and interactive, becoming on-site check-in landmarks. Some installations are donated or recycled after the festival. Unlike Burning Man's ephemeral, burnable installations, Coachella's installations place greater emphasis on the long-term dissemination of visual symbols and brand integration. Coachella's art installations merge the natural texture of the desert landscape with cutting-edge digital and material technologies, emphasizing landscaping, communicability, and social attributes.

In academic literature, art installations in music festivals are generally regarded as important carriers of "immersive experience" and "emotional resonance." Therefore, discussions on their role in enhancing festival participation and facilitating emotional connections are abundant. Gaspar, Rui Paulo Martins^[4] discussed how to create multimedia installations suitable for music festivals through creative coding and generative design, demonstrating how technology can combine with visual art to drive the creation of new immersive environments and installations at music festivals.

2.2 Review of Research on Interaction Ritual Chain Theory

The origin of interaction ritual chain theory can be traced back to French sociologist Émile Durkheim's groundbreaking study of religious rituals. Durkheim discovered that members of primitive tribes do not always live in a daily secular state. Instead, through periodic collective gatherings, emotional sharing, and symbolic ritual performances, they continuously awaken and reinforce individual members' sense of collective belonging, enabling society to maintain continuity and integration across generations. However, Durkheim's research perspective always focused on the special domain of religious life, paying insufficient attention to the trivial yet orderly interpersonal interactions of everyday life. American sociologist Erving Goffman transplanted Durkheim's grand concept of religious rituals into the micro-level scenes of daily interpersonal interaction, completing a crucial turn in the study of interaction rituals. Goffman proposed the core concept of "interaction ritual," referring to those ritualized behaviors in daily life that maintain social order and express social meaning. He argued that behaviors like "face-work" and "civil inattention" are essentially micro-rituals that sustain social order. Goffman's insight was that even the most mundane daily encounters contain ritualistic logic. However, Goffman's analysis was limited to immediate situational interaction, neglecting how rituals transcend situations and form chain-like, sustained effects ^[5]. Building on the foundations laid by Durkheim and Goffman, contemporary American sociologist Randall Collins systematically constructed interaction ritual chain theory. Collins posits interaction rituals as the core units of social life, arguing that macro-social structures are formed by linking countless micro-situational interaction rituals in a "chain" fashion, hence the term "interaction ritual chain." Interaction ritual chain (IRC) theory indicates that rituals are a type of programmed behavior that express meaning through various symbols, representing activities where participants

share a common focus of attention and shared emotions ^[6]. The theory constructs an interaction ritual model, pioneering the integration of individual action, emotional experience, and social solidarity within a single framework, and introduces the core concept of "emotional energy" (EE) to explain the intrinsic motivation driving individuals' continued participation in social interactions. Unlike the brief and intense collective effervescence described by Durkheim, emotional energy is a long-term, stable, positive emotional capital.

Collins points out that the initiation and operation of a successful interaction ritual depend on the effective combination and cyclical feedback of four basic elements: "Group assembly and bodily co-presence" requires two or more people to gather in the same spatial location. This space can be a physical place or a virtual scene achieving perceptual synchronization through technological media. "Barriers to outsiders" can be physical or psychological boundaries. This barrier defines group boundaries, protects internal interaction from external interference, and simultaneously reinforces the group identity and sense of belonging among internal audiences. "Mutual focus of attention" is the core hub that concentrates group attention and coordinates interaction rhythms, serving as a prerequisite for emotional entrainment. When a group shares a common focus, individuals unconsciously mimic those around them physiologically, and the behaviors and emotions of ritual participants gradually converge.

When these four elements are present and mutually reinforcing, the interaction ritual enters a cyclical process of "rhythmic entrainment." Through mutual focus and emotional sharing, the audience instantly generates emotional stimuli. These brief emotional stimuli are continuously amplified and accumulated through ongoing interactive feedback, gradually escalating into higher-intensity "collective effervescence." Ultimately, a successful interaction ritual produces the following four outcomes:

1. Group solidarity: Through shared emotional experiences and symbolic resonance under the interaction ritual, the audience develops a strong sense of belonging and identity, perceiving themselves as part of the group.
2. Emotional energy: During participation in the interaction ritual, the audience's emotional experiences gradually accumulate and transform into relatively stable "emotional energy." When individuals gain positive feelings in the ritual, they often form higher emotional energy, manifesting as increased confidence, willingness to participate, and sense of belonging, thereby motivating them to continue engaging in group interactions.
3. Group symbols: Through shared rituals during group interaction, the audience generates a series of symbolic signs, such as specific slogans, gestures, or identifiers. Outsiders who have not personally participated in the group ritual typically find it difficult to understand their meaning. For internal members, however, these symbols act like "energy batteries," storing emotional energy, evoking past experiences, and serving as starting points for new interaction rituals, linking different rituals into a "chain" ^[7].
4. Moral standards: The moral standards shaped by interaction rituals prompt audiences to respect and defend group symbols and to feel righteous anger toward behaviors that violate group solidarity.

2.3 Feasibility Analysis of Applying Interaction Ritual Chain Theory

Interaction ritual chain theory seeks to explain how group emotions form and how collective identity is constructed. Music festival art installations, precisely under specific spatiotemporal conditions, serve as material media that facilitate group assembly, emotional sharing, and symbol production. This intrinsic connection not only makes the theoretical intervention logically reasonable but also implies methodological innovative possibilities.

In recent years, with the proliferation of digital technologies and interactive devices, the interactivity, visual impact, and sensory immersion of art installations at music festivals have continuously improved. However, behind this technological frenzy, the problems in installation design of "prioritizing technology over emotion" and "prioritizing the individual over the group" have become increasingly severe. As a result, although art installations can create brief novel experiences, they struggle to form lasting emotional memories. The audience's experience in front of an installation is often fragmented and point-like. They take photos, check in, experience the interactive effects, and then quickly leave, without forming genuine connections with each other. Their emotional experience dissipates rapidly upon leaving the installation. What warrants reflection is that the interaction of art installations should be understood as "facilitating dialogue between people through technology," rather than merely "dialogue between people and technology." Experience should be understood as collective emotional resonance, rather than merely individual pleasurable sensations.

Interaction ritual chain theory can provide systematic theoretical guidance to address this dilemma. The theory focuses on "group emotional cohesion" as its analytical core, pointing out that successful interaction rituals produce four key outcomes: group solidarity, individual emotional energy, group symbols, and moral standards. Crucially, the theory elucidates the complete mechanism of ritual from initiation to outcomes, namely the integration of four elements—bodily co-presence, boundary setting, mutual focus, and emotional sharing—which, through the reinforcing feedback of rhythmic entrainment, ultimately generate emotional energy and group symbols. Following this pathway, designers can connect fragmented interactive experiences into a coherent emotional narrative, elevating the audience's stay at the installation from superficial, "check-in" style participation to a deeply ritualistic experience.

3 Design Strategy

3.1 Ritual Initiation: Spatial Construction Strategies

Rituals require clear boundaries to distinguish "inside" from "outside," and this is the starting point of spatial construction. In the noisy, open, and fluid environment of a music festival, installations should carve out relatively independent ritual zones through physical enclosures, terrain changes, light and shadow variations, and other techniques. Notably, this boundary should not be an isolating wall but rather a permeable membrane-like structure. It signals that entrants have left their daily state and entered the "liminal" phase of the ritual, while maintaining visual appeal to the moving external

crowd through semi-transparent, semi-open forms, creating tension through mutual gazing.

Installations also need to actively intervene in the audience's perceptual system, synchronizing the audience's sensory rhythms through the coordinated design of multi-modal stimuli. For example, using low-frequency vibrating floors to transmit the physical pulse of the music, allowing the body to feel the rhythm's call before conscious awareness; using diffuse ambient lighting instead of spotlight-style stage illumination, dissolving the binary opposition between audience and performer, immersing everyone in a unified atmosphere. When breathing, heartbeats, and body movements tend towards synchronization due to shared sensory input, individual boundaries begin to dissolve, and an ineffable "collective feeling" quietly emerges.

Furthermore, the interaction ritual requires a clear "object of mutual focus" as the target for emotional projection. The installation should preset a focal point that is both visually distinctive and meaningfully open. This focal point should not be a single, imposed symbol but rather an "empty signifier" that invites the audience to fill in the meaning with their own experiences. The presence of this focus allows the gazes of originally unacquainted individuals to converge in the same direction, and the act of mutual gazing is indirectly witnessed, thereby initiating mutual attention and emotional entrainment among group members.

3.2 Ritual Deepening: Interaction Catalysis Strategies

Once the installation successfully assembles dispersed individuals into a potential collective characterized by bodily co-presence, rhythmic convergence, and focused attention, the interaction ritual chain enters a substantive transition from "co-presence" to "interaction generation." The driving mechanism of the interaction ritual chain lies in the cyclical feedback between mutual focus and emotional entrainment. Installation design needs to actively intervene in this cycle, acting as a catalyst to transform potential physical assembly into genuine interactive behavior.

The primary pathway to achieve this goal is to create a "necessity for interaction." In conventional installation experiences, the audience often interacts with the object as isolated individuals, engaging in a one-way "human-object" interaction rather than a social "human-human" interaction. Installation design should break this isolated mode, making it necessary for audiences to collaborate collectively to fully experience the installation's function or meaning. This design strategy transforms others from "strangers in the background" into "necessary collaborators for completing the experience." The motivation for interaction thus shifts from externally imposed to internally driven. The audience is not required to interact; rather, the structure of the installation invites or even "compels" them to interact.

After interactive behavior is stimulated, the installation needs to further capture the emotional signals emerging from group interaction and feed them back to participants in a visualized, perceptible manner. A collective shout triggers an overall color change in the lighting; a synchronized jump causes the ground to resonate with a tremor; a shared gesture makes the installation's surface display the projected outline of the group. When the audience sees their actions amplified, responded to, and inscribed into the

installation's "memory" as a visible, shared collective spectacle, this immediate positive feedback reinforces their sense of efficacy. They realize they are creators of the group emotion, not passive onlookers, thereby stimulating even higher-intensity emotional investment.

The deepening of the interaction ritual also requires the "generation and anchoring of symbols." Successful interaction rituals produce abstract representational symbols—a slogan, a gesture, a color—that condense the memory of collective effervescence, becoming emblems of group identity. The installation should leave room for the spontaneous emergence of such symbols and provide a means for their material anchoring. For example, the installation could generate a real-time visual totem that changes with the intensity of interaction, freezing into a symbolic image that can be recorded and disseminated at the ritual's climax. When participants carry these symbols away from the installation and into other corners of the music festival, the ritual's emotional energy breaks through the physical boundaries of the installation, extending into the wider social space.

From creating the necessity for interaction, to amplifying the feedback of interaction, to anchoring the symbols of interaction, the interaction catalysis strategy forms a progressive action chain. The installation is no longer a static object waiting to be viewed, but an active agent intervening in the network of group relationships. It compels strangers to cooperate with one another. In this process, the audience completes an identity transformation from "I" to "we."

3.3 Ritual Continuation: Meaning Sedimentation Strategies

The complete cycle of the interaction ritual chain encompasses not only the immediate collective effervescence but also, crucially, whether emotional energy and symbolic resources that can be carried away, recalled, and reactivated are formed after the ritual concludes. However, a music festival is a typical temporary gathering space. When the lights go out, installations are dismantled, and the crowd disperses, the peak experiences of the ritual, if not effectively sedimented, can easily degenerate into fleeting sensory consumption. Therefore, the third strategic focus of installation design lies in constructing a mechanism for meaning sedimentation, transforming transient emotional outbursts into lasting emotional memories and group identity.

Meaning sedimentation first requires the material translation of symbols. The abstract symbols that spontaneously emerge during the ritual process should be captured by the installation and anchored onto perceptible material carriers. Through built-in sensing and generative systems, the installation can analyze the audience's sound levels, movements, or rhythmic patterns in real time, transforming them into dynamic light patterns. More importantly, at the ritual's conclusion, the installation should generate material symbols that the audience can take away, such as unique badges generated based on the day's interaction data, physical cards recording the group's voiceprint, or dynamic visual totems that can be saved to a phone by scanning a QR code. These carriers hold the emotional afterglow of the ritual scene, allowing participants, even after leaving, to repeatedly activate the collective memory of that moment through gazing or sharing.

The ultimate aim of meaning sedimentation is a channel for the reactivation of emotional energy. The emotional energy produced by the ritual should not be disposable fuel but rather a reservoir that drives the audience's continued participation and spontaneous dissemination. The installation can include digital extension interfaces, such as a QR code granting access to an online community space exclusive to those present that day, where they can share their ritual moments and continue writing shared memories. This digital space becomes a second ritual field outside the physical installation, where daily fragmented interactions maintain the embers of emotion until the next physical gathering rekindles them into a blazing flame.

From the material translation of symbols to the channel for emotional reactivation, the meaning sedimentation strategy completes the loop of the interaction ritual chain. The installation is no longer a one-off event backdrop but becomes a storage device for emotional memories and a summoner of future rituals. When the audience leaves the music festival with tangible symbols and connectable communities, the transient bodily co-presence transcends spatiotemporal boundaries, evolving into a lasting emotional community—this is the ultimate proof of the transformation of music festival art installations from "visual embellishment" to "emotional ritual generator."

From the perspective of theoretical development, introducing interaction ritual chain theory into the study of music festival installation design not only provides guidance for design practice but also enriches and expands the theory itself. Traditional research on interaction ritual chain theory has primarily focused on scenarios such as religious ceremonies, political rallies, daily social interactions, and online communities. However, in the context of music festival installation art, a significant change occurs in the subject relationships of the ritual: the interaction between human and installation becomes the medium, while the interaction between people mediated by the installation becomes the core. This "technology-mediated interaction ritual" raises new research questions for the theory.

4 Conclusion: The Construction of Emotional Rituals

Interaction ritual chain theory provides a clear action framework for the design turn of art installations at music festivals. From the spatial construction of "ritual initiation," to the interaction catalysis of "ritual deepening," to the meaning sedimentation of "ritual continuation," these three strategies progress step by step, all pointing toward a core goal: elevating the installation from "visual embellishment" to "emotional ritual generator."

The essence of this turn is a fundamental shift in design focus from "object" to "people," from "individual" to "group," and from "moment" to "duration." Traditional installation design is enamored with technological marvels and sensory impacts, viewing the audience as isolated aesthetic subjects. In contrast, installation design from the perspective of emotional ritual sees the audience as a potential emotional community waiting to be activated. It no longer asks "how to make people see more spectacularly," but rather "how to make people see each other, respond to each other, and remember each other." It is precisely this shift in questioning that transforms the installation from a

viewed object into a medium for relationship emergence, a conduit for emotional flow, and a container for collective memory.

When the music festival lights go out and the crowds disperse, what truly remains is never the installation's technical specifications or visual form, but the emotional resonance and identity that people experienced together within it. The ultimate meaning of installation design points precisely to this irreplaceable emotional ritual that belongs to "us." This is both the core insight that interaction ritual chain theory offers to design practice and the necessary path for music festival art installations to transition from consumer spectacle to cultural ritual.0

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