

Participatory Art “Burnt and Disappeared”: The Dematerialization of Zhizha Rituals and an Existential Critique of Twenty-First-Century Capitalism

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Abstract

This study examines how participatory art can function as a medium of social critique and as a means of restoring the function of ritual amid the dominance of twenty-first-century capitalism, characterized by accelerated life rhythms, productivity-oriented logics, and hyper-individuality. The study proceeds from the assumption that capitalism shapes not only economic practices but also intervenes in lived experiences of time, social relations, and ritual materiality, as reflected in the transformation of the *Cheng Beng* ritual and *zhizha* offerings. Employing a qualitative research design with a phenomenological–artistic approach, this study draws on data collected through participatory observation, visual documentation, and reflective field notes involving eight participants engaged in experimental enactments of the participatory artwork *Burnt and Disappeared*. The artistic process consisted of crafting suit replicas from joss paper, phases of waiting, and the subsequent burning of the objects. Data were analyzed using a thematic–phenomenological approach to capture participants’ temporal, affective, and relational experiences. The findings reveal three central insights. First, the dematerialization of *zhizha* operates as an embodied critique of capitalist logics of status and productivity by shifting value orientations away from material outcomes toward process and the experience of loss. Second, the experience of slowness is not perceived as an objectively extended duration but as a qualitative transformation of temporal consciousness that enables reflection and full presence. Third, participatory art mediates a transition from individual experience to collective awareness through shared and witnessed experiences of loss. The implications of this study underscore the potential of participatory art as an alternative space for restoring ritual functions, social relations, and existential reflection in contemporary society. The originality of this research lies in its integration of participatory art practice, phenomenological analysis of temporal experience, and a critique of capitalism through ritual dematerialization—an approach that remains empirically underexplored within studies of art and ritual in the Indonesian context.

Keywords: Participatory Art, Ritual Dematerialization, Slowness, *Zhizha*, Twenty-First-Century Capitalism, Collective Awareness.

Introduction

The transformation of the social landscape in the twenty-first century is marked by the acceleration of life rhythms, the intensification of productivity-oriented logics, and a growing competition for recognition that increasingly adheres to individual identity (Aly et al., 2022; Chapman et al., 2022; Spiller, 2024). In this condition, people no longer work merely to meet needs, but to continuously renew their self-worth within the system—through achievements, images, and status. As a consequence, everyday social experience tends toward fragmentation: social relations become increasingly transactional, time becomes increasingly “compressed,” and collective spaces that once anchored togetherness gradually lose their binding force. One of the spaces most affected by this transformation is ritual—not merely as a religious or cultural practice, but as a social mechanism that organizes time, emotion, and relationships in a communal way (Danugroho et al., 2025; Wahid, 2022).

The Indonesian context reflects conditions that closely align with these broader dynamics. Over the past decade, internet penetration has increased consistently and has shaped a digital economic ecosystem that accelerates consumption and the circulation of status-signs. The Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2024) reported that internet penetration reached 78.19% in 2023, up from 77.01% in 2022, indicating the expanding intensity of digital life in society. In parallel, reports on e-commerce consumer behavior reveal the massive scale of the digital economy: the number of e-commerce users in Indonesia in 2023 was estimated at 178.9 million people (approximately 65% of the population), while the total value of e-commerce transactions in 2022 reportedly reached IDR 476.3 trillion (Annur, 2023). These data do not directly explain changes in ritual practice, but they provide an important grounding: social life is increasingly driven by logics of speed, instant availability, and orientations toward “novelty” and “recognition”—two elements that fundamentally reshape how people assign meaning to objects, time, and social relations.

At this point, the work of Byung-Chul Han becomes particularly relevant. In *The Disappearance of Rituals* (2020), Han conceptualizes ritual not simply as a sequence of standardized actions, but as a way of structuring time and social relations through symbolization that allows humans to meaningfully “inhabit” the world. In this view, community does not primarily emerge through explicit communication, but through shared symbolic experience. When rituals lose their symbolic force, what collapses is not merely tradition, but the social capacity to produce togetherness, to process loss, and to acknowledge the presence of “the other.” In societies organized by performance-oriented logics, individuals are increasingly positioned as “projects” that must constantly be optimized, while fragile experiences such as grief or failure are pushed out of public space. In this

sense, the “disappearance of ritual” signals a broader social crisis in which togetherness is severed, time is accelerated, and meaning is reduced.

The *Cheng Beng* (*Qingming*) ritual offers a sharp case through which to read this crisis. Culturally, *Cheng Beng* constitutes a moment of ancestral veneration that combines grave visitation, tomb maintenance, prayer, and the offering of ritual objects—a social apparatus that historically affirms family bonds and collective memory (Makmur, 2018; Tjioe et al., 2023). Studies on *Cheng Beng* within Indonesian Chinese communities generally frame the ritual as a space for spirituality, emotional well-being, and the reproduction of identity and family cohesion across generations. Ritual practices such as grave cleaning, food offerings, incense burning, and the burning of paper offerings form collective symbolic actions that connect relations between the living and the deceased (Chang, 2023). Through shared participation and informal transmission within families, *Cheng Beng* functions as a medium for the inheritance of values and cultural memory (Jureerat & Jiraporn, 2014). However, in contemporary social contexts, the ritual shows a more subtle shift: from slow, collective practices toward activities that are more concise, privatized, and adaptive to urban lifestyles and digital technologies (Yunzhu et al., 2025). At the material level, the most visible change appears in paper offerings (*zhizha*), which no longer merely represent basic needs but increasingly imitate symbols of status and luxury. This shift marks how *Cheng Beng* becomes a site of negotiation between traditional symbolism and capitalist rationality, in which ritual objects mirror contemporary economic values and social identities (Chen, 2022).

The most striking transformation appears in the changing forms of offerings. Whereas *zhizha* previously replicated basic necessities such as money, houses, or food, contemporary practices increasingly feature replicas of luxury goods and symbols of modernity—such as smartphones, designer bags, or cars—that insert logics of status into the ritual domain. This indicates that ritual does not simply “preserve tradition,” but also becomes a field in which capitalist signs—brands, luxury, and prestige—are produced and circulated (Tjioe et al., 2023). In this context, existential problems do not stand apart from material ones: as identity becomes increasingly tied to status-objects, people find it more difficult to process loss as a shared experience. Grief becomes privatized, while public recognition is increasingly exchanged through material symbols.

Existing research on these issues has developed along several major strands. First, critical-theoretical studies of modernity and social pathology interpret the weakening of ritual as a crisis of symbolization and community, with Han as a key reference in naming this phenomenon as an erosion of ritual’s communal force (Bräunlein, 2025; Kipp, 1993; Mujibuddin & Zuliana, 2025; Schlehe, 2010). Second, material-cultural studies of death rites and offerings highlight how changing forms of offerings follow socio-economic dynamics; in the context of

Qingming/Cheng Beng, the emergence of “branded” offerings demonstrates the penetration of capitalism into death symbolism (Jureerat & Jiraporn, 2014; Yunzhu et al., 2025). Third, contemporary art literature—particularly on participatory art, relational aesthetics, and dematerialization—shows how art can shift from the production of objects toward the production of relations, situations, and social experiences (Abdrudan, 2023; Carrasco-Barranco, 2025; Park, 2025). Bourriaud (2022) emphasizes relational art as a practice grounded in being-together and intersubjectivity, while Bishop (2023) critically interrogates the ethical claims of participatory art and calls for stricter assessments of its aesthetic–political dimensions. Meanwhile, Lippard and Chandler (1968) frame dematerialization as a conceptual strategy that shifts attention from objects to ideas and processes.

Despite its richness, this body of literature leaves an important gap. Han’s critique powerfully explains the erosion of ritual as a crisis of community, yet relatively few studies examine how this crisis can be “re-practiced” through the design of experience rather than merely theorized. Studies on *Cheng Beng* in Indonesia have mapped its spiritual–psychological functions and social identity dimensions, but they have not sufficiently examined how the transformation of offerings—from needs to status—operates as a mechanism of capitalism within ritual, nor how this shift alters the way people make sense of loss. At the same time, participatory art studies often emphasize social relations but do not consistently connect them to ritual dematerialization as a means of producing existential reflection on grief, status, and “the other.” This research is positioned precisely at this intersection: bridging ritual, capitalism, dematerialization, and participation within a single analytical framework tested through artistic practice.

Based on this gap, the study pursues three objectives. First, it analyzes the shifting meanings of the *Cheng Beng* ritual—particularly the practice of burning *zhizha*—within the context of twenty-first-century capitalism. Second, it designs the participatory artwork *Burnt and Disappeared* (2020) as a ritual simulation that produces “slow time” and a space for reflection. Third, it explains how participatory art can function simultaneously as a medium of social critique and an apparatus for existential reflection. The suit is selected as a dense social sign: it is not merely a garment, but a symbol of professionalism, occupational rank, and class hierarchy—a concrete manifestation of the economy of recognition.

The central argument of this study is that dematerialization—the act of “eliminating” an object through burning—does not operate as a voiding of meaning, but as a critical mechanism that interrupts capitalism’s logic of symbolic accumulation. When participants are asked to create suit replicas from *joss paper* and then burn them, they do not simply observe a ritual; they experience a contradiction. A status-object is intentionally produced, temporarily

valued, and then destroyed by the hands of its own maker. Within Han’s framework, this process functions as an attempt to restore ritual’s role in shaping communal atmospheres and processing loss; within participatory and relational art frameworks, it becomes the production of shared relations and experiences that enable reflection. Accordingly, this study advances a working hypothesis: the stronger the participants’ involvement in the dematerialization process (making–destroying), the more open the space for reflection on the relationship between material status, identity, and the meaning of loss, and the more likely an awareness of “the other” emerges as an existential horizon marginalized by capitalism.

On this basis, the research question is formulated as follows: how can the *Cheng Beng* ritual and the transformation of *zhizha* be re-reflected as an existential critique of twenty-first-century capitalism through the creation of the participatory artwork *Burnt and Disappeared*? The theoretical contribution of this study lies in extending Han’s notion of the “disappearance of ritual” by demonstrating that participatory art can function as an in-between space—a space of experience—for testing, rather than merely describing, how ritual, dematerialization, and social relations may be restored as meaning-making devices within an economy of recognition.

Methods

The unit of analysis in this study is the participatory art practice *Burnt and Disappeared* as both an artistic and social event. The analysis focuses on participants’ experiences as they engage in a simulated *Cheng Beng* ritual through the processes of creating and burning suit-shaped *zhizha*. In addition, the unit of analysis includes the artistic objects themselves—suits made from *joss paper* and the altar installation—as well as the social interactions that emerge throughout participation, all of which function as media for reflecting on capitalism, identity, and existential meaning in the twenty-first century.

This study employs a qualitative research design with a phenomenological–artistic approach, selected to capture participants’ subjective experiences, perceptions, and reflections that cannot be reduced to quantitative variables (Maxwell, 2009). The phenomenological approach enables an examination of how existential meanings—particularly those related to loss, identity, and collectivity—are directly lived and experienced through artistic practice. This design aligns with Byung-Chul Han’s framework, which understands capitalism as a phenomenon of lived experience, and with participatory art practices that position experience as the central site of meaning production.

The data sources consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data derive from field trials of the participatory artwork *Burnt and Disappeared*, conducted on January 3, January 12, and January 25, 2025, during the Open Studio Integrated

Arts program. These data include the experiences of eight participants throughout the process of making suits from *joss paper*, burning the objects, and expressing verbal and nonverbal responses during the activity. Secondary data come from a literature review, particularly works by Byung-Chul Han on capitalism, ritual, and the achievement society, as well as academic articles that address transformations in *zhizha* practices and the *Cheng Beng* ritual in contemporary contexts.

Data collection was carried out through participant observation, visual documentation, and the researcher's reflective notes. Participant observation was used to record interaction dynamics, bodily gestures, duration of engagement, and participants' emotional responses during the creation and burning of *zhizha*. Visual documentation in the form of photographs and videos captured the stages of activity and the transformation of artistic objects. In addition, participants' spontaneous reflections and verbal feedback after the activity were recorded as supporting data to deepen the understanding of their subjective experiences.

Data analysis followed a phenomenological thematic analysis conducted in several stages. First, the researcher performed data reduction by grouping participants' experiences and responses into preliminary themes such as materiality, time, loss, identity, and social relations. Second, these themes were interpreted by situating them within Byung-Chul Han's theoretical framework on the disappearance of ritual, hyper-individuality, and the achievement society. Third, the analytical results were interpreted as a critical reflection on how participatory art and the dematerialization of ritual objects can function as media for rearticulating existential meaning within the context of twenty-first-century capitalism.

Results and Discussion

Dematerialization of *Zhizha* as a Critique of Capitalist Logics of Status and Productivity

The transformation of *zhizha* demonstrates that capitalist logics operate not only within everyday spaces of consumption but also permeate the materiality of ritual. Field observations conducted at Yu Lian ritual supply shop (Jl. Cibadak, Bandung, West Java) show that *zhizha* appears as a seasonal commodity that gains prominence ahead of *Cheng Beng*, particularly in the form of suitcase-style packages containing clothing and accessories (such as shirts, watches, shoes, and bags). Contemporary *zhizha*, however, tends to be produced using readily available modern paper materials (art paper, cardboard, printing paper), allowing three-dimensional replicas to be reduced to two-dimensional printed images. This shift accelerates production and increases material efficiency. Patterns for *zhizha* can even be freely downloaded and reproduced through

printing systems, reinforcing “speed” and “efficiency” as dominant values in contemporary culture. These tendencies align with Han’s critique of the achievement society, in which humans are transformed into project-subjects constantly oriented toward output and optimization (Han, 2015b, 2020). Within this framework, changes in *zhizha* represent not merely technical adjustments but signal a broader shift in values: ritual practices become increasingly “compressed,” while offerings grow easier to produce and replicate.

Figure 1. Contemporary *Zhizha* and Modern Paper Materials Circulating in the Market



These findings form the conceptual basis for selecting *joss paper* as the primary material in *Burnt and Disappeared*. Unlike modern papers that appear “controlled” (neat, stable, and easily printable), *joss paper* foregrounds fragility: its fibers are loose, thin, highly absorbent, and prone to tearing. Material experiments revealed that this paper resists attempts to “strengthen” or “control” it (for example, through wax immersion or coloring), and when burned it does not always disappear completely into ash but often leaves behind a charred skeletal form. This characteristic is crucial, because dematerialization in the artwork is not positioned as the erasure of all traces, but as the loss of form that leaves a residue—a “remainder” that allows participants to witness loss in concrete terms. Here, dematerialization functions as an experiential device: participants do not merely “know” that the object will disappear; they see an irreversible process of destruction, shifting the object’s value from prestige-as-outcome to experience-as-process.

Figure 2. Exploration of *Joss Paper* Burning: Color Change, Residue, and Remaining Structural Forms



Figure 3. *Joss Paper* Material Experiments (Absorption, Wax, Coloring Tests)



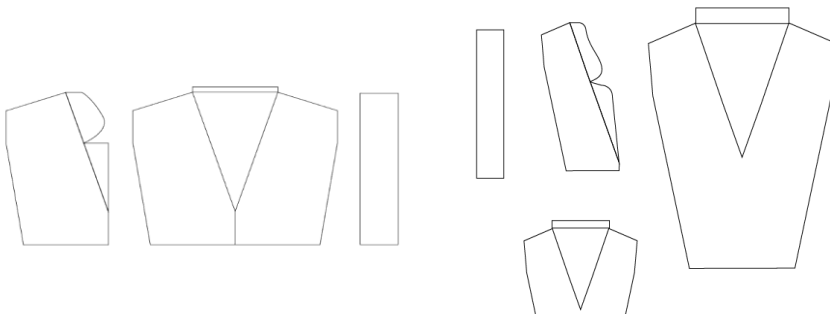
The selection of the suit form further intensifies the critique of status and productivity. During the design phase, clothing origami proved too quick to execute and insufficient in conveying a sense of “luxury,” prompting a shift to cut-and-paste techniques that required greater precision and longer duration. Across several model tests, the strongest marker of “luxury” did not derive from brand references but from the structural form of the suit itself—particularly the collar—which is socially associated with professionalism, occupational rank, and workplace hierarchy. Trial findings show that participants recognized this symbolism spontaneously: they described the suit as “not ordinary clothing,” noted that the collar “makes it feel more luxurious,” and even likened the making process to designing elite stage costumes (“like a Met Gala or fashion show

design”). These responses confirm that status operates through form and social imagery rather than solely through commercial labels. The suit evokes a “class imagination” while simultaneously opening a space to dismantle that logic through the act of destruction.

Figure 4. Process of Making Suit Models Using Cut-and-Paste Techniques



Figure 5. Final Digital Design of the Suit Model (Collar as a Marker of “Luxury”)



Empirically, the critique of productivity also emerges through participants’ experiences of time and work pressure. Trials measuring the duration of suit construction (eight participants) indicate that size and complexity significantly affect process length: the longest average times occur in larger sizes, particularly in women’s models with more complex cuts (such as curved arm-shoulder sections). Many participants identified technical difficulties during the cutting

and folding of collars—described as needing to be “neat” and having “no fixed rules”—which indirectly reproduced work-related pressures (precision, standards, anxiety about mistakes) on a micro scale. Notably, when the researcher introduced a stopwatch element in certain sessions, several participants reported an affective shift: a process that initially felt relaxed began to feel “rushed,” even though no real deadline existed. Here, productivity appears as a social sensation rather than an objective necessity; the pressure arises not from the artwork’s requirements but from the internalized imagery of efficiency and work discipline that participants bring into the activity.

Table 1. Duration of Suit Model Construction (Men/Women; Small/Medium/Large) by Eight Participants

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	Average
Women’s Model									
Small	10'14"	12'02"	8'09"	14'12"	N/A	6'27"	11'27"	7'56"	10'25"
Medium	10'58"	16'57"	11'00"	N/A	N/A	7'26"	10'41"	8'41"	11'04"
Large	13'22"	14'36"	14'54"	26'13"	N/A	7'00"	13'30"	10'13"	14'28"
Men’s Model									
Small	4'41"	7'19"	5'30"	8'41"	7'36"	3'59"	8'34"	6'14"	7'11"
Medium	6'55"	7'35"	7'37"	N/A	8'05"	3'57"	11'21"	8'21"	8'27"

Figure 6. Documentation of Suit Construction Duration Trials



The peak of meaning reversal—and the core of dematerialization as critique—emerges at the moment when participants learn that the objects they have made will be burned. In several early trials, the researcher deliberately postponed explaining the purpose of burning until the end of the making process. At this point, participants expressed shock and disbelief, stating that they had not

expected to “make something only to burn it.” These reactions reveal how, within capitalist culture, the value of work is typically attached to outcomes that can be stored, displayed, or accumulated. When outcomes are rendered temporary and intentionally destroyed, this logic collapses. Yet the collapse of outcome-oriented value shifts the center of meaning toward the making process itself. Several participants emphasized that the object felt “handmade” and free from artistic expectations, allowing the process to become a space of autonomy—even as it remained shadowed by standards of neatness and technical anxiety. Dematerialization thus does not merely “erase” a status-object; it compels participants to inhabit the tension between productive drive (to create something neat and valuable) and the reality of deliberate loss—an embodied critique of how capitalism ties existential meaning to material achievement (Han, 2015a, 2020).

Figure 7. Trial of Suit Construction and Burning within the Altar Installation



Figure 8. Variations in Participants' Suit Outcomes (Including Improvisations and Decorations as Attempts to "Add Value" Before Loss)



The experience of dematerialization is further reinforced by the spatial design of the altar installation. Participants construct the suits while standing (without chairs), mirroring the domestic altar context that typically does not provide seating, and then move toward the burning furnace. During the burning phase, the atmosphere shifts noticeably: lively conversation during the making stage gives way to silence as the object burns, and participants witness “loss” directly. In this practice, the installation does not function as decoration but as a ritual trigger that helps participants interpret the experience as a social-symbolic event (Bishop, 2011). At the same time, because the artwork demands active involvement, meaning is not imposed by the artist; participants generate interpretation through experience and interaction, consistent with relational art’s logic that positions social relations as the medium itself (Bourriaud, 1998). Post-activity reflections reveal a shift in evaluation: participants described the experience as a reflection on “life meaning” and “self-identity,” or questioned whether habitual practices of “making and discarding” are in fact “system-regulated”—direct articulations of how dematerialization provokes critical awareness of productivity and status.

Figure 11. Placement of the Altar Installation and Semi-Private Spatial Atmosphere



In sum, when the suit—as a symbol of status—is produced from fragile material and subsequently burned, it undergoes a functional reversal: from a marker of prestige to a medium for recognizing the fragility of status values themselves. Dematerialization enables participants to experience directly that productivity does not necessarily culminate in “valuable” outcomes, and that value can shift toward process, relation, and an awareness of loss. In other words, dematerialization in *Burnt and Disappeared* operates as a critical mechanism that interrupts capitalism’s tendency to attach existential meaning to achievement and objects, replacing it with an experience of loss that is witnessed, lived, and processed within a ritual-like space (Han, 2015, 2020).

The Experience of Slowness as the Restoration of Ritual Function

The experience of slowness emerges as a central dimension in the participatory artwork *Burnt and Disappeared*, particularly through the structure of activity duration and pauses that cannot be accelerated. The sequence of activities—from brief instructions (approximately 2 minutes), the making of suits from *joss paper* (approximately 10–15 minutes), waiting for one’s turn to burn the object (approximately 3–5 minutes), to witnessing the burning itself (approximately 3–5 minutes)—produces a temporal experience that differs markedly from the participants’ everyday rhythms. Time in this work does not aim at achieving results as quickly as possible; rather, the work designs time to be fully inhabited, including moments of waiting and stillness that serve no immediate productive function.

Participants do not interpret slowness in this work as “long time” in a quantitative sense. Most of the eight participants reported that the duration felt fast or even “unnoticed,” especially during the suit-making phase. This finding indicates that slowness in participatory art does not correspond to objective duration but to a shift in the quality of temporal consciousness. Participants do

not experience time as an external pressure to be chased; instead, they experience it as a condition integrated with bodily presence and attention. One participant described the activity as "just flowing, not thinking about time," while another emphasized that they "did not feel chased, even while knowing they were working on something."

From a phenomenological perspective, engagement in manual activities—cutting fragile *joss paper*, folding the lapel, and assembling the suit—generates an intense, rhythmic bodily awareness (Crowell, 2010). Careful hand movements, focused attention on the material, and light social interactions such as casual conversation and brief laughter allow time to "flow" with the activity. Several participants characterized the experience as "calm," "relaxed but focused," or "as if forgetting that they were working." In this context, time loses its instrumental character as a measure of productivity and becomes a medium of shared experience. Slowness does not arise because the activity slows down technically, but because participants remain fully present in the process—inhabiting time subjectively through the body, social relations, and attention—in contrast to the capitalist logic that demands efficiency and continuous acceleration.

By contrast, the burning phase introduces a markedly different temporal experience. Observations indicate that verbal interaction decreases significantly at this stage, participants' bodies tend toward stillness, and their gaze concentrates on the slowly unfolding burning process. No action can hasten the fire, and no intervention can halt the gradual disappearance of the object. At this moment, time becomes palpably present through silence, waiting, and an awareness of an uncontrollable process. The emotional responses vary—from restlessness and quietness to reflection—but all mark a shift from an active-productive mode to a contemplative one.

This experience of waiting and stillness functions as a restoration of a ritual dimension that capitalist life has increasingly eroded. In everyday contexts, people often treat waiting as a pause to be avoided or filled with other activities in order to remain productive (Klingemann et al., 2018). In this work, waiting becomes the core of the experience. Participants do not feel compelled to "do something"; instead, they witness and experience loss as a temporal process. In this way, slowness operates as a mechanism that interrupts the continuity of speed and efficiency and opens a space for reflection that fast, result-oriented activities cannot provide.

These findings resonate with Byung-Chul Han's argument that ritual does not operate through achievement or output but through temporal experience that allows individuals to pause amid demands for performativity. In *Burnt and Disappeared* (2020), participatory art does not merely represent ritual; it reactivates ritual's function as a temporal experience by creating an in-between time (*zwischenzeit*) in which participants can process loss, recognize the limits of

control, and reflect on their relationship to time. Slowness here does not signify laziness or a rejection of activity; rather, it constitutes a condition for restoring meaning, affirming that not all human experiences must be measured, accelerated, or converted into results.

Accordingly, participatory art can present ritual as an experience of time rather than as a mere symbol or narrative. Through deliberate duration, non-productive pauses, and cultivated silence, *Burnt and Disappeared* demonstrates how slowness can function as both an aesthetic and an existential strategy to challenge the temporal logic of capitalism and to recover spaces for reflection in twenty-first-century human life.

From Individual Experience to Collective Awareness

Burnt and Disappeared mediates a significant shift from individual experience to collective awareness through a layered structure of participation. In the initial phase, participants occupy a relatively private and individual situation while working on suit models made of *joss paper*. This activity requires personal concentration, bodily engagement, and an intimate relationship between the individual and the object being crafted. Yet, although participants work individually, the experience does not remain fully isolated. The presence of others in the same space—through light conversation, mutual observation, or simply sharing time—gradually fosters an awareness that this personal activity unfolds within a broader social context.

The most decisive transition toward a collective dimension occurs during the burning phase. When participants wait their turn and witness the burning of each object, the previously formed private space transforms into a communal one. Emerging interaction patterns—such as queuing, brief comments before or after the burning, and shared silence as the fire consumes the object—indicate that the experience of loss no longer remains individual but becomes socially shared.

Field observations record spontaneous collective responses during the burning phase, without verbal instruction or explicit guidance from the researcher. When one participant burns the suit model they created, others automatically direct their attention to the burning object. Some express empathy through sustained gazes or by slightly leaning toward the burner, as if jointly “witnessing” the loss. One participant quietly remarked, “It’s a pity, especially since it took time to make,” while another responded with an awkward, subdued laugh—not as humor, but as an expression of discomfort in the face of something newly created being destroyed. At times, no comments emerge at all: several participants choose to remain silent together, standing side by side and watching the burning process until it ends. These shared patterns of response—gaze, silence, and similar affective reactions—do not arise from rules or directives;

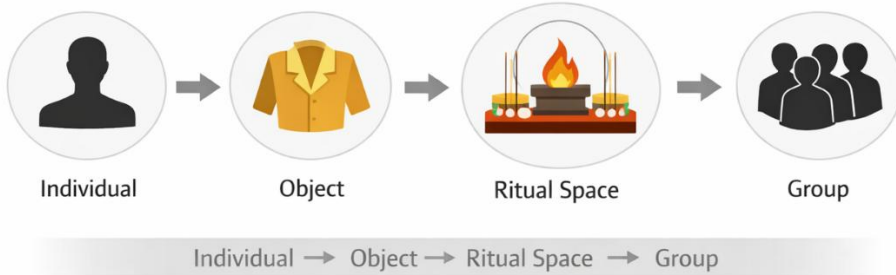
rather, they grow out of a shared situational experience, signaling the emergence of a temporary yet tangible collective awareness through a jointly experienced loss.

Comparing the experience of working alone with that of witnessing others lose their objects clarifies the social function of this work. While working individually, participants focus on skill, form, and personal process. By contrast, when observing the burning of another participant's work, attention shifts from "what I made" to "what we are experiencing." Loss no longer appears merely as the disappearance of an individual's labor, but as a shared event that marks the limits of human control over outcomes and possession. In this context, participatory art creates what can be described as an in-between space (*zwischenraum*): a temporary social space in which individuals fragmented by hyper-individualistic logic can reconnect through shared experience.

This finding aligns with Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics, which understands art not primarily as the production of objects but as the production of social relations (Bourriaud, 1998). In *Burnt and Disappeared*, these relations do not form through direct collaboration in object-making, but through the temporal and emotional experiences shared during the burning phase. Art functions here as a mediator that enables intersubjective relations to emerge without erasing differences in individual experience. In other words, collectivity does not arise through imposition; it grows from participants' willingness to be present with and to witness one another.

More broadly, this finding reinforces a critique of capitalist social conditions that tend to privatize experience, including experiences of loss and mourning. In everyday life, loss often appears as a personal matter that individuals must resolve quickly and privately. By contrast, this work presents loss as a legitimate experience to be shared and collectively witnessed. This approach resonates with Byung-Chul Han's argument about the erosion of communal spaces in performative societies, where ritual loses its function as a generator of social bonds (Han, 2020). Through participatory art, *Burnt and Disappeared* demonstrates that this function can still be restored—not by normatively reproducing ritual, but by creating experiential conditions that allow collective awareness to emerge.

Figure 12. Diagram of the Transition from Individual Experience to Collective Awareness in Participatory Art



The diagram visualizes the relational trajectory activated in *Burnt and Disappeared*, moving from the individual to the group through a sequence of mediation rather than direct collectivization. The process begins with the individual subject, whose engagement initially takes place in a relatively private mode through interaction with an object—the suit made of *joss paper*—that concentrates personal intention, labor, and symbolic investment. The object then functions as a transitional mediator that carries individual meaning into the ritual space, where dematerialization occurs through burning. This ritual space operates as a threshold (liminal zone) in which personal attachment is suspended, control over the object is relinquished, and loss becomes temporally and sensorially present. Only after passing through this ritual mediation does the experience open onto the group, not as a pre-given collective identity, but as an emergent form of togetherness produced through shared witnessing, silence, and affective resonance. The diagram thus clarifies that collective awareness in this work does not arise from immediate social interaction or collaborative production, but from a staged process in which objects and ritual space play an active role in transforming individual experience into relational consciousness. In this sense, the visual schema reinforces the study’s argument that participatory art can function as a social technology that reconstructs communal relations indirectly, through dematerialization and temporal experience, rather than through explicit coordination or verbal communication.

Accordingly, the work makes an important contribution to understanding participatory art as an alternative social space. From private, individual experience, the work guides participants toward a temporary yet meaningful collective awareness. Art thus operates not only as a medium of personal expression, but also as an in-between space that restores social relations, empathy, and the presence of the “other” within increasingly fragmented contemporary life.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that *Burnt and Disappeared* does not primarily operate as a “representation” of the Cheng Beng ritual, but rather as an aesthetic mechanism that reactivates the ritual function for producing existential awareness within contemporary social conditions. Three main findings substantiate this claim. First, the dematerialization of *zhizha* in the form of suits exposes how capitalist logic penetrates ritual materiality: status, prestige, and self-worth are not produced solely through everyday consumption, but are also negotiated through ritual offerings that have become increasingly easy to produce, replicate, and circulate. Second, the structure of duration and pauses (*slowness*) shows that “slow time” in this work does not merely refer to objectively long duration, but to a transformation in the quality of temporal experience: during the making phase, time flows as bodily engagement and social relation; during the burning phase, time appears as waiting, silence, and loss that cannot be accelerated. Third, the work mediates a transition from private experience to collective awareness: individual labor on objects shifts into a communal experience when burning compels participants to witness one another’s loss, thereby producing social relations not through technical collaboration, but through shared temporal–affective experience.

How can these findings be explained? The explanation lies in the way the work shifts the center of meaning from result to process, from possession to letting go, and from time as an instrument of productivity to time as a medium of experience. Dematerialization functions as an “interruption” of capitalist habitus that binds value to output. When participants burn something they have just produced with care and effort, the usual meaning system based on accumulation—saving, displaying, converting results into recognition—collapses and gives way to a fundamental question: if the result disappears, what remains? At this point, bodily experience becomes central. The fragility of *joss paper*, the difficulty of folding the collar, and the tension of “having to be neat” activate a form of awareness that is not merely cognitive, but embodied. At the same time, *slowness* does not operate as a “technical slowing down,” but as a shift in temporal regime. The making phase opens a time that “flows” because hands, attention, and light conversation converge, while the burning phase forces a time that “presents itself” because the object disappears gradually and participants cannot control the process. This is the logic of ritual as read by Han: ritual organizes temporal experience and forms a collective atmosphere not through output, but through pauses, repetition, and transitions that allow reflection and the processing of loss (Han, 2015, 2020). In other words, this work shows that critique of capitalism becomes effective precisely when it is lived as an event of body–time–relation, rather than delivered solely as narrative message.

In comparison with previous studies, Cheng Beng (*Qingming*) offers a sharp case for reading the symbolic and communal crises of modernity. Historically and culturally, Cheng Beng constitutes a moment of ancestral veneration that combines pilgrimage, tomb maintenance, prayer, and offerings—a social apparatus that affirms family bonds and collective memory (Makmur, 2018; Tjioe et al., 2023). Numerous studies position this ritual as a space of spirituality, emotional well-being, and the reproduction of intergenerational family identity. Practices such as grave cleaning, food offerings, burning incense, and paper offerings form collective symbolic actions that connect the living and the dead (Chang, 2023), while informal transmission within families sustains tradition (Jureerat & Jiraporn, 2014). Recent research, however, also marks contemporary adaptations: the ritual becomes increasingly concise, private, and compatible with urban lifestyles and digital mediation (Yunzhu et al., 2025). At the material level, *zhizha* has shifted from representing basic needs to imitating symbols of status and luxury, revealing the penetration of capitalism into symbols of death and identity (Chen, 2022; Tjioe et al., 2023). This is where the contribution of this study becomes specific. Rather than merely “recording change” in Cheng Beng and *zhizha*, this research demonstrates how participatory art can produce an experiential space that renders this shift affectively and temporally legible, not only descriptively. The finding on dematerialization extends cultural–material studies of ritual and offerings (Jureerat & Jiraporn, 2014; Yunzhu et al., 2025) by adding a critical mechanism: not only has *zhizha* become “more luxurious,” but this transformation can be reversed through deliberate destruction, causing the logic of status to lose its footing. The finding on *slowness* reinforces critical-theoretical theses on the erosion of ritual’s communal power (Bräunlein, 2025; Kipp, 1993; M Mujibuddin & Zuliana, 2025; Schlehe, 2010), while adding an important nuance: *slowness* does not always mean long duration, but rather a quality of temporal awareness that can emerge even when participants perceive time as “fast.” Finally, the finding on the transition toward collective awareness connects to literature on relational and participatory art that frames art as the production of relations (Bourriaud, 2022), while remaining attentive to Bishop’s critique that ethical claims of participation must be tested through empirical evidence of relations that actually emerge in practice (Bishop, 2023). In this context, the collectivity formed during the burning moment—empathy, awkward laughter, shared silence—functions as empirical data that both tests and reinforces the claim of being-together as medium rather than slogan (Bourriaud, 2022). At the same time, the strategy of dematerialization affirms the conceptual tradition that shifts meaning from object to idea and process, yet in this study dematerialization does not stop at an aesthetic position; it becomes a device for making loss experientially shareable (Lippard & Chandler, 1968).

The significance of these findings can be read on three levels. Historically, the work shows that rituals do not simply “survive” or “disappear” in modernity, but transform through materiality and temporal rhythm. When *zhizha* is produced ever more quickly and efficiently, ritual loses part of its temporalizing power—the capacity to organize time as celebration or mourning—and easily shifts toward concise, privatized practices (Han, 2020; Yunzhu et al., 2025). Socially, the work demonstrates that loss and mourning—which in performative societies tend to be privatized—can be restored as experiences collectively witnessed through participatory design and spatial arrangement. The collectivity that emerges is not large or permanent, but temporary and sufficient to activate empathy and awareness of the “other,” a crucial point for imagining forms of solidarity within hyper-individualized societies (Han, 2020). Ideologically, the study reveals how capitalism operates through image and form. Status does not derive solely from brands, but from social symbols embedded in the structure of the suit itself—collars, cuts, and associations with professional hierarchy (Bell, 1972; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013; Scott, 2001). When these status forms are rendered fragile and then destroyed, the work interrupts the fantasy of stable identity provided by objects and forces an existential question to emerge: where does self-worth reside—in objects, in recognition, or in relations and processes?

Reflection on these findings must consider both function and dysfunction. Functionally, the work succeeds in (1) presenting a critique of capitalism as an experience of body and time rather than as discourse alone; (2) restoring ritual as a temporal experience that enables reflection; and (3) producing a temporary social space that facilitates empathy, silence, and collective awareness. However, several potential dysfunctions warrant attention. First, because participant experience is shaped by the narrative provided by the researcher, there is a risk that reflection becomes overly “guided,” leaving limited room for truly autonomous interpretation, thereby rendering the work more didactic than dialogical (Bishop, 2023). Second, the ambiguity of terms such as “luxury” may shift attention toward consumption alone, whereas the conceptual target concerns what is “valuable” or “meaningful” in an existential sense; this ambiguity risks superficial readings focused only on class and branding. Third, *slowness* risks failing to register if the spatial setting is too crowded or if social interaction makes participants feel that time passes quickly; in such cases, ritual function as contemplative pause may weaken if the burning phase does not adequately facilitate silence (Han, 2020). Fourth, ethical-cultural risks must be considered: the appropriation of ritual forms (altar, burning) may generate tension if participants or communities perceive it as reducing spiritual symbols to aesthetic instruments, especially when the work explicitly frames itself as simulation rather than spiritual enactment.

Based on these dysfunctions, action plans can be directed toward improving both research–art design and public presentation strategies. First, to reduce the effect of “guided reflection,” narrative framing can be minimized and divided into two stages: (a) before the activity, a brief contextual introduction to Cheng Beng and *zhizha*; (b) after participants record their initial reflections, a concise theoretical framing can be introduced, preserving greater autonomy in articulation. Second, to address conceptual ambiguity, the term “luxury” can be replaced or explicitly paired with alternatives (for example, “valuable/meaningful” versus “luxurious/branded”), accompanied by examples that do not reduce meaning to consumption alone. Third, to safeguard the function of *slowness*, spatial settings can be more tightly designed: the burning phase can be clearly marked as a ritual moment through lighting, sightlines, and controlled distraction, while queues can be framed as part of the experience, for instance through brief markers of silence that prevent constant conversation. Fourth, to respond to cultural sensitivity, the work can include a curatorial statement clarifying its ethical position: the work does not replace ritual, but reads the transformation of ritual in modernity, while opening space for dialogue with relevant communities through public discussion so that appropriation becomes relational rather than unilateral. Through these measures, the work can maintain the sharpness of its critique without losing its dialogical quality, while strengthening its central contribution: demonstrating how participatory art can function as an “in-between space” that restores human relations to time, loss, and togetherness within the landscape of contemporary capitalism.

Conclusion

This study concludes that *Burnt and Disappeared* demonstrates how participatory art can function simultaneously as a mechanism of social critique and as a means of restoring ritual function within contemporary capitalist life. The main findings show that the dematerialization of *zhizha*—particularly in the form of a suit as a symbol of status—dismantles the attachment of existential value to objects, achievement, and productivity. Through the embodied sequence of making, waiting, and witnessing the burning process, participants do not merely understand loss at a cognitive level, but experience it bodily, temporally, and relationally. The *slowness* that emerges in this work does not correspond to objectively long duration, but to a transformation in the quality of temporal awareness: time is inhabited as a shared experience rather than pressured as a productive resource. Moreover, the work mediates a shift from individual experience toward collective awareness, as the loss of objects is processed communally through silence, empathy, and shared attention. In this sense, the study affirms that ritual—even when mediated through artistic practice—retains the capacity to shape social relations and existential reflection amid the erosion of communal spaces.

Scholarly, this research contributes to three main areas. First, within studies of ritual and modernity, it offers an empirical reading of how capitalist logic penetrates ritual materiality, while simultaneously demonstrating the possibility of its reversal through deliberate dematerialization. Second, in the field of participatory art and relational aesthetics, the study enriches existing discourse by showing that the production of social relations can occur through temporal and affective experience—particularly through shared experiences of loss—rather than solely through technical collaboration or verbal interaction. Third, the research advances the understanding of *slowness* by positioning it as a phenomenological quality of temporal experience, not merely as a matter of duration. By integrating ritual theory (Han), dematerialization (Lippard & Chandler), and relational aesthetics (Bourriaud; Bishop), the study offers an analytical framework that situates art as an *zwischenraum*—an in-between space—for the recovery of meaning, relationality, and existential awareness.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the relatively small number of participants and the specific context of the artwork limit the generalizability of the findings to broader ritual practices or participatory art forms. Second, participants’ experiences and reflections are not entirely independent of the conceptual narrative provided by the researcher, which leaves room for interpretive bias. Third, the study does not systematically compare participant experiences across different cultural or religious backgrounds in a cross-community framework. Future research may therefore expand the range of participants, explore variations across cultural contexts, or compare other forms of participatory art that employ ritual and dematerialization. Further studies may also examine the long-term effects of such experiences on participants’ attitudes, social relations, and temporal awareness. Through such developments, scholarly understanding of the role of art in responding to crises of ritual, time, and social relations in contemporary society can become more comprehensive.

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