‘Bite Your Tongue: Antonin Artaud and the Neo-Avant-Garde’


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Then you will have taught him to dance upside down

As in the mania of the dancehalls,

And this upside down

Will be his real place.

Antonin Artaud

According to countercultural legend, at some point in the early 1960s, the French artist and activist Jean-Jacques Lebel broke into the Paris headquarters of the radio station Radiodiffusion Française, emerging with a taped copy of the controversial radio play Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu by Antonin Artaud (1896–1948). The play had been commissioned from the dissident Surrealist writer in 1947 but censored prior to the scheduled broadcast, its vitriolic criticism of American militarism, decadent bourgeois society, and organized religion apparently proving too controversial in the aftermath of World War II and the era of the Marshall Plan. More than a decade later, the recording retained an aura of transgression. Lebel organized underground gatherings to listen; he shared the tape with poet Allen Ginsberg, who in turn sent copies to poet Michael McClure, radical theatemakers Judith Malina and Julian Beck, poet Jack Hirschman and radio producer Ruth Hirschman (who broadcast it on the West Coast KPFK radio
station in 1964), and poet and Civil Rights activist LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka). Many were already familiar with the work of the controversial writer, following the publication in translation of a number of his poems, letters, and theatre manifestoes. But his impact would only intensify during the 1960s.

Produced during the last year of Artaud’s life, Pour en finir represented the apogee of his vast output; it affirmed his reputation for aggressively experimental writing and reinforced the radical anarchic, anti-rational, and anti-bourgeois project that had been articulated in treatises, poems, letters, and essays, as well as a body of compelling drawings and “spells” that became publically known much later. In the decades following his death, Artaud’s work would have a profound impact on poets, writers, artists, and filmmakers in a number of contexts, including among the Lettrists in France, the Beats in the United States, underground poetry scenes, Happenings and other radical performance practices, and experimental and political theater. His words, both in French and in translations fashioned by poets, found a home in the pages of little magazines and poetry journals, in off-off-Broadway theaters and alternative art spaces, circulating via underground networks and word of mouth.

The recording held urgent appeal among artists and writers alike during a decade that would be marked by political and social unrest (indeed Artaud’s and Lebel’s mythologizers often erroneously date the latter’s smash-and-grab antics to the revolutionary moment of May 1968). Undoubtedly Artaud’s outsider and anti-establishment position—manifested in his infamous mental instability, his dissident relation to the Surrealist group, and his antipathy towards all forms of authority—lent him impressive countercultural credentials for the neo-avant-garde that were reiterated by his estate’s reluctance to grant permission for the play to be published posthumously, themselves fearful of its blasphemous content. Artaud had spent many years in
asylums (most notably the one at Rodez) suffering from mental disorders and addiction to opiates; the impact of this lived experience on his work was not lost on critics both during his lifetime and posthumously. When the French writer Alain Jouffroy declared in 1948 that Artaud was “a man who disturbs men,” it was more than just his controversial output that was at stake.\(^4\)

The American poets and editors of the first anthology of Artaud’s works in translation, Jack Hirschman and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, also pursued this aspect of Artaud’s personal mythology, initially proposing for the volume the somewhat sensational title *Antonin Artaud: Mad Writings*.\(^5\)

Although the more neutral *Artaud Anthology* was chosen for the book, published by City Lights Press in 1965 (fig. 00), the sentiment remained: a *Los Angeles Times* review of the *Artaud Anthology* warned readers that “This volume is not for the casual reader, nor even for the reader who prefers a logical construction, who resists the anti-logic of a mind decayed by drugs, ultimately driven to the frightening borders of breakdown and psychosis.”\(^6\) The emphasis on mental degradation as a frame for Artaud’s intellectual output was clear. It was also controversial.

Among those most offended by posthumous accounts that emphasized Artaud’s mental instability was Paule Thévenin, who had known Artaud and acted as his representative, executor, and posthumous editor. In her own review of the *Artaud Anthology* in *Le Figaro* in 1965, she labeled its poet-translators “American beatniks,” and asserted that they had falsely claimed Artaud as “a precursor to the poetry of drugs and madness.”\(^7\) Thévenin’s accusation of Artaud’s American translators rested upon the notion that they fetishized his drug addiction and his madness. Artaud’s heavily mythologized delirium—both psychological and narcotic-inflicted—represented the contested terrain upon which his legacy played out both in France and abroad. It also holds the key to understanding the popularity of his work among postwar artists and writers.
However, delirium operated as much more than romanticized psychobiography. Rather, listeners encountered in the rants and roars of *Pour en finir* the potential for delirium to act as a material, linguistic, and somatic imperative, in ways that gave Artaud a distinct political valency for the postwar generation. Artaud’s ideas had a profound impact upon artists and writers in the 1950s and 1960s in large part because the multifarious procedures of delirium seemed a compelling artistic strategy for the neo-avant-garde.

While Calvin Tomkins hailed Marcel Duchamp as the radical "master" of the Neo-Dada generation, celebrating him for being “cool,” “objective,” and “ironic,” Artaud might be said to embody the opposite: heated, earnest, and subjective to the point of weakness. As scholars have noted, delirium operates throughout Artaud’s oeuvre, from his fraught, early correspondence with Jacques Rivière, the editor of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, to his Theatre of Cruelty manifestoes (published in 1938 as part of the anthology of essays titled *Le Théâtre et son double*), and the 1947 essay "Van Gogh, le Suicidé de la Société." It does so in three key ways: first, delirium appears explicitly as subject matter in, for example, his essay on Vincent Van Gogh and his Theatre of Cruelty manifestoes, which advocate a rejection of stale theatrical conventions in favor of a theater that is immediate, immersive, and violently overwhelming. Second, it is manifested structurally: Artaud’s self-confessed ambition to “write outside of grammar” resulted in the kind of disordered syntax, partial sentences, glossolalia, and invented language found most notoriously in *Pour en finir*.8 Finally, Artaud writes in such a way as to undermine the authority of the text by means of frequent prevarication, contradiction, interruptions that declare his own failure to communicate or persuade, and passages that merge fiction and fantasy so overtly that the reader has no choice but to mistrust his voice. His works operate as assemblages of signs that betray themselves in the very act of writing, for "all
writing," Artaud announced (in a phrase cited in one of Nancy Spero’s 1969 Artaud Paintings), "is pigshit." Artaud’s concern with linguistic and psychic displacement is thus located not only in the topic of his writing, but also in the mode of writing itself. For Artaud, the regime of delirium embraces experience, subject, and method.

**Art and Anti-grammar**

For artists, filmmakers, and poets, the occupation of a space “outside of grammar” opened up the potential for both material and philosophical enquiry. In France, Artaud’s delirium informed the project of the Lettrists, who counted him among other precedents including Dada and mainstream Surrealism. Kaira M. Cabañas has noted the parallels between Artaud’s project and the group’s disruption of conventional cinematic and poetic representation. She notes parallels between the the poésie physique of Gil J. Wolman and the forceful sounds at work in Pour en finir, for example. In terms that echo Artaud’s own embrace of delirium as method, the group’s leader, Isidor Isou, described his own work *Traité de Bave et d’Eternité* (translated as *Venom and Eternity*) as “a deliberate accumulation of faults, a kind of cinematic anti-grammar.” The film adopts this approach on the level of narrative—the protagonist Daniel advocates for a breakdown of culture via film that is decomposed, gangrenous—and formally, by means of marks painted onto the film that obscure the image beneath.

In the United States, the Beat artist Wallace Berman made a film that deployed this notion of anti-grammar as a rejection of narrative editing in favor of filmmaking by accumulation and attrition. *Aleph* (ca. 1958–66; **fig. 2**), Berman’s only film, comprises a rapid stream of eclectic filmed and still imagery that depicts the artist’s family, home, pictures,
mementos, and works of art, as well as images from magazines, television, book jackets, and famous figures both real and fictional. Some appear for just a few frames, disappearing out of view almost before they are registered. As Peter Boswell has noted of a similar density of imagery in the films of Bruce Conner, this rapid editing denies the possibility of fixing the entire film in one’s memory. But where Conner’s films might be described as a collage of appropriated imagery, Berman’s also invites material comparisons with collage. In Aleph, the surfeit of filmed imagery is matched by a surfeit of materials: Berman applied paint, crayon, and transfer-lettering directly onto the 8mm film stock in a manner reminiscent of Isou’s film. Words and images are brought together in a manner that subjects both to obscurity: in places the paint and crayon marks and letters fill the screen almost entirely, obscuring the image beneath with a darkened smear, while the words that Berman presses onto the film become illegible when projected. In places those letters are cracked, peeled, and disintegrated to the point of near non-existence, while the material burden these layers placed on the delicate 8mm stock caused Aleph literally to break up when it was run through a projector. Berman’s film is rendered both visually illegible and physically vulnerable by the accretion of signs and surfaces; ultimately it is partially destroyed by the process. Signification splinters before our eyes.

The contingency that is at work in Aleph is discernible also in the small-scale, predominantly loose-leaf journal Semina that Berman produced sporadically in nine issues between 1956 and 1964 on a hand-held letterpress machine in his home (pls. 00, 00). Comprising palm-sized sheets of card collages with photographs and drawings and imprinted with short poems (including two by Artaud), Semina was disseminated by mail, its loose leaves inviting endless reconfiguration by its recipients. This sense of contingency compromises the physical and intellectual ontology of the artwork in a maneuver that counters the notion of the
autonomous modernist masterpiece. That is, the work of art no longer functions solely as a self-referential proposition; instead it participates in the world in material and political terms, as an object that is always on the brink of dissolution. Furthermore, as the poet Michael McClure observed, *Semina* implicated the works of other artists and writers into this project of dissolution: *Semina* “poises the work of George Herms or Bruce Conner on the crack of crisis, on the lip of entropy,” McClure explained, “it’s about to fall apart.”

In their anti-narrative structure, their surfeit of visual and textual information, and their adoption of the paradigm of disintegration, both *Aleph* and *Semina* operate according to “the logic of delirium” that Alan Cholodenko has identified at work in Artaud’s writing. In this, they share something with less obviously precarious works: the meticulous ink marks that teem and coalesce in Bruce Conner’s drawings (1955–72), the letterset swarms of Mira Schendel’s *Objeto Grafico* (1967) (fig. 00 in *Baum*), and the overlapping blocks of type that cling to Nancy Spero’s series of thirty-seven Codex Artaud scrolls (1971–72) (pls. 00, 00), all present the overabundance of signification, according to which signs seem to multiply, mutate, and obliterate.

If the Beat poets had found countercultural potential in Artaud’s willingness to speak truth to power and his openness to mental and linguistic experimentation, Spero felt kinship with his marginalization, and her encounter with Artaud’s ideas happened in the context of identity politics and the rise of second wave feminism. Although she had appropriated other kinds of text into work before she encountered Artaud, and had cited for example the verse of that other great poète maudit Jean Genet in a painting of 1968, Artaud represents her most sustained engagement with a single source. She had acquired a copy of the *Artaud Anthology* in the summer of 1969, though quickly turned to read his words in the original French in the *Oeuvres complètes.*
Citations in both languages form the basis of two series: the *Artaud Paintings* (1969–70) and the thirty-seven *Codex Artaud* (1971–72). In the first group, short excerpts from various texts are rendered in gouache in slanting, left-handed writing, accompanied by collaged elements. In the latter works, many of the same extracts are reproduced in uppercase bulletin type, though are no clearer for that shift to an apparently authoritative and bureaucratic mode, nor any less subjective.

On one level, Spero’s ventriloquizing of Artaud’s marginal voice represented an answer to her own experience of being sidelined and silenced as a female artist, but she has also described it in relation to her antiwar paintings, leading her work “from the violence of war to the violence of the exposed self.”

This trajectory is based on a concern with language and its derangement. Spero has explained that “I knew enough French to realize that Artaud was classically trained and brilliant, and that he was tearing away at the fabric of structure and language, railing against society and the shunting aside of the artist.” Although Spero’s works appear different from Berman’s, the *Codex Artaud*’s collaged passages of cut or torn text enact a similar procedure of linguistic and physical accretion and attrition. The numerous typed quotations from Artaud and incantatory iterations of his name that are collaged onto Spero’s *Codex Artaud* include frequent overlapping, repetition, missing letters, and fragmented or truncated words (fig. 3). Spero’s methods recall Artaud’s own anti-writing strategies but deploy them against Artaud himself: “I fractured his already fractured screams and hysteria.”

In *Codex Artaud XVII* (fig. 4), the grid of typed text is penetrated by a tongue that protrudes from the gaping jaws of a disembodied head, a motif that recurs throughout the Artaud Paintings and the Codex scrolls. The collaged figure acts both as a further disruption to the body
of the language, and as a visual manifestation of both the “phallic tongue” to which the Artaud passage refers, and the dual meaning of the word tongue (langue), which signifies both language and the organ of speech. In one of the Artaud Paintings (fig. 5), the written exhortation to “mange ta langue” (“bite your tongue”) spirals around a gaggle of disembodied heads, demanding the cessation of speech but also indicating idiomatically a violence wrought on the body itself.

In Spero’s works as in Berman’s, language, supposedly aimed at facilitating communication, is deliberately deranged by the body in a manner that echoes Artaud’s project. The disruption of language via delirium, hysteria, and “talking in tongues” operates as a deliberate strategy aimed at undermining a symbolic order structured through the acquisition of such language. Words shape both self and society, so the derangement of speech and writing serves both to dissolve the unitary subject and to dismantle social order. Irrationality is proposed in opposition to the ordering power of the word, since logos also implies the weight of law and regulation. Such is the impulse that underpins the question that Spero poses, invoking the pre-Symbolic realm, in the Artaud Paintings: “why couldn’t it have been some world without numbers or letters?”

**Fraught Bodies**

If postwar artists were drawn to Artaud’s insistence on the unreliability of language and his model for how to divorce it from rational sense, they also enacted in the processes of assemblage and collage his demand for the tangible materiality of words and their crucial link to the body. That is, for Artaud, words are also sounds, inseparable from bodily organs and cells;
the disruption of language must operate on a somatic level as the dislocation of the body and its component parts. In their use of decaying materials often in fragments, the processes of collage and assemblage involved a material precariouslyness that emphasized the body’s potential to disintegrate and decompose. In constructions such as CHILD (1959), CHERUB (1959), THE BRIDE (1960), and MEDUSA (1960; fig. 6), Bruce Conner drew specifically on the materially unstable properties of wax, a medium under constant threat of deliquescence, to render uncanny forms that suggest bodies rotting or otherwise in transition. In others, such as PORTRAIT OF ALLEN GINSBERG (1960; fig. 7) and SNORE (1960), stretched nylon stockings, rusting cans and tubes, and dangling appendages construct bodies that seem rickety and falling apart. They suggest Artaud’s description in Pour en finir of the body as a “mass of ill-assembled organs” as well as the fraught bodies that inhabit Ginsberg’s poem Howl (indeed the poem arguably demonstrates the influence of Artaud, whom Ginsberg discovered via author Carl Solomon in the corridors of the New York Psychiatric Institute in 1949). Such figures resist the logic of bodily unity, insisting instead on the body and the self as physically and psychically unstable.

If Conner’s constructions turn bodies inside out, revealing their dark interiors, his meticulous drawings relate to the body and its mutations in other ways. In a manner reminiscent of Artaud’s somatic disruptions, Conner has related his drawings to the microscopic investigation of molecules and microbes as well as to the vast scale of landscapes and galaxies.17 As well as reflecting the new horizons and viewpoints permitted by scientific discovery, including advances in genetic medicine and the development of the space program, Conner’s dual analogy might also reflect a pervasive anxiety about the place of the human body in this expanded new cosmos, and the potential dangers posed by systems that set out to constrain the body in both its physical and its social state. Conner’s description also echoes the poetic
investigations of Conner’s friend, the poet Michael McClure, who described in several poems written in the late 1950s the psychotropic effects of ingesting buttons of the drug peyote. For McClure, as for the countercultural generation more broadly, peyote expanded the mind’s possibilities, and Artaud was a figure connected to the psychic and physical transformation it wrought. The American surrealist poet Philip Lamantia, for example, listed Artaud as a co-author of his 1959 pamphlet Narcotica, which extolled the virtues of mind-expanding drugs while denouncing the control exerted by psychiatry. McClure described the effects of peyote in particular in slightly more ambiguous terms in two key works: "Peyote Poem" which was published on a foldout sheet as the sole contents of the third issue of Berman’s Semina in 1958 (fig. 8), and "For Artaud," published as a small pamphlet in 1959. The latter outlines the sense of corporeal vibrating and explosion that the drug induced, an epic struggle enacted at the level of organs, nerves, cells, and proteins, at once visceral and transcendental. The reduction of the body to its most miniscule components recalls Artaud’s attention to what he calls the “microbic harmfulness” of God, while the rickety sickness that McClure describes parallels Artaud’s assertion that “man is sick because he is jerrybuilt.” McClure’s visual metaphors echo Conner’s in their emphasis on the dark interior of the body, and both resonate with Artaud’s model of the body as at once degraded and degrading. Although "For Artaud" predates the first radio broadcast of Artaud’s Pour en finir, McClure was in possession of an unpublished translation of Artaud’s radio play, and his poem draws heavily on the premise and spirit of that earlier text, both in its use of glossolalia to elicit a visceral response in his listeners, and in the vision of a body expanded and exploded. For Artaud concerns the base materiality of the body and the possibility of operating at its outer limits, both physically and conceptually.
Umberto Artioli noted that in Artaud’s essay on Van Gogh that “Pictorial delirium, applied to the transformation of natural objects, is analogous with another delirium that operates directly on the body, rending it apart in order to effect its regeneration.”¹⁹ The body dismantled, or the “body without organs” is one of the central proposals of Pour en finir, one that stems from Artaud’s overwhelming impulse to divest humanity of all that is superfluous: his denunciation in that text of the deceit of god (deliberately rendered in lower case) and organized religion is proposed alongside the abandonment of useless organs and excrement and all languages and signs that betray themselves in the repetitious process of representation. The explosion of bodily unity that Artaud advocates is thus an emancipatory imperative.

Bodies or works of art put under duress appear in much of the art produced during the 1950s and 1960s. The examples discussed here compromise language, the body, and the work of art. They are subject to fragmentation, precariousness or entropy, accumulation, accretion, or attrition, contingency, or physical dispersal. This is not to say that all instances of such procedures directly reference Artaud, though his ideas were certainly important for a number of practices during that era that sought to attack the unity of the autonomous work of art and to respond to a political situation that placed pressure on the body within society. Reading these procedures as sympathetic to the project of Artaud enables us to see this widespread strategy of dismantling in political terms. In each case, precarity operates as a material concern but is also a somatic procedure, in which the body of the work stands in for the social body, wracked with pain and dismantled in protest. If systems of authority were felt to enact control over the social body, then the body also represented a potential site of resistance via countercultural practices.

For Artaud, the body in society was bound by the political urgencies evident in France before and during World War II and in its immediate aftermath; for those practicing in the 1950s
and 1960s, it provided a means to contest both artistic and political hegemonies in the context of the Cold War. The poet Robert Duncan has described the years between 1957 and 1964 as “a Season in Hell period […] led on by the specter of the poète maudit.” Duncan lists Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Jean Cocteau as key influences, before settling on Artaud as “the cultural hero of this descent.” At the outset of his essay "No More Masterpieces," which appeared in The Theatre and Its Double, Artaud outlines “the asphyxiating atmosphere in which we live” in which existing forms of expression are respected without question, when it should be recognized that they are exhausted and must be broken apart. His denunciation of toxic artistic conventions suggest, too, a broader social and political charge that would have resonated with a postwar audience in Europe and the United States alike. In the 1950s and 1960s, his accusations rang out against the dual backdrop of Cold War tensions, the insidious suspicion of the House Un-American Activities Committee, growing protests against capital punishment, and conservative censorship of art and literature. They also felt relevant to the long shadow of Abstract Expressionism’s legacy, with the attendant rhetoric of the autonomous masterpiece (another kind of unified body) and the artist-genius (an equally dangerous form of authority). The act of dismantling the body and its languages might be seen, to borrow a phrase from historian Julie Stephens, as “anti-disciplinary politics,” that is aimed at dismantling both artistic and social order and hierarchies in tandem.

There is more to Artaud’s delirium, then, that the romantic myth of one who suffered in life, despite the reservations expressed by Paule Thévenin. If, as the poet Robert Duncan observed, Artaud “took his sickness itself to be the new revolution,” his delirium was not merely a fact of his biography but rather a strategy that infused his entire oeuvre, one that posited chaos as a means to challenge authority on whatever front, whether from within or without. Postwar
artists and writers found in Artaud a model for dismantling the structures of authority via the linguistic, material, and corporeal mode of delirium, transposing Artaud’s concerns to fit new urgencies.23

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2 I am grateful to Jean-Jacques Lebel for sharing information about the recipients with me.


5 Lawrence Ferlinghetti, letter to Jack Hirschman, undated, box 1, collection no. 0158, Jack Hirschman papers, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.


7 Paule Thévenin, “Artaud naturalisé beatnik!” *Le Figaro littéraire*, December 9, 1965: “les beatniks americains […] un précurseur de la poésie de la drogue et de la folie.” (Translation by the author.)

9 Cabañas, *Off-Screen Cinema*.


15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.


18 Antonin Artaud, “To Have Done with the Judgment of God,” (unpublished manuscript), p. 2; see also *Northwest Review* 6, pp. 60–61.


