

Antonin Artaud. Bibliothèque nationale de France (François Mitterand site), Paris, 7 November 2006 – 4 February 2007.

*My drawings are not drawings but documents.
You must look at them and understand what's inside.*
Antonin Artaud, Rodez, April 1946¹

On 7th June 1946, at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt, André Breton, newly returned to Paris, addressed a sympathetic crowd who had gathered in support of Antonin Artaud. Breton asserted that Artaud had gone farther than any other in 'this threefold objective to transform the world, to change life, to reshape the human mind.'² This rhetoric was no doubt partly inspired by the extreme nature of Artaud's long incarceration in the asylum at Rodez, alleviated only weeks earlier by his move to more conducive surroundings in the Paris suburb of Ivry. However, Breton's homage also points to the significance of Artaud's project of negation, both in the context of Surrealism's investigation of the realm of the unconscious and in its broader challenge to the very structures of representation. These last few years of Artaud's life would be extremely prolific; he worked furiously, producing hundreds of drawings and notebooks and revisiting his early treatises on theatre and film.

For several decades following Artaud's death at Ivry on 4th March 1948, and despite significant critical interest in his writing, Artaud's drawings and notebooks remained hidden from public view, with much of the material exhibited for the first time during the 1980s. In 1993, his executor Paule Thévenin bequeathed his four hundred and six notebooks and other papers to the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and it is this impressive collection that formed the core of their exhibition. The range of outlets through which Artaud expressed his ideas encompasses a vast range of art forms; the *cahiers* were shown alongside sketches, portraits, photographs, letters, essays, manifestoes, poems, sound recordings, reviews of theatre, film and art, screenplays, designs for costumes and stage sets, and other personal artefacts. These exhibits were loaned from private and public collections, including the Centre Pompidou's large collection of Artaud's drawings (also the bequest of Thévenin). Though these had been exhibited on previous occasions, notably at MoMA in 1996, this was the most comprehensive attempt to date to portray Artaud's life and work through such a richly broad selection of material. Although the vast impact of Artaud's work and its significant legacy, in both Europe and America, is still to be satisfactorily documented, this exhibition made a valuable contribution to critical discussion of his work. The exhibition was arranged in broadly thematic rooms, exploring Artaud's self-portraiture, theatre work, writing on art, and his early career in film. These were arranged around a central section that was more biographical in content, though contained drawings, personal notebooks, letters, as well as the notorious 'spells' that seem to encompass all of these media.



That the first works that visitors encountered were the self-portraits established the theme of identity and its disintegration as the defining force behind Artaud's oeuvre and the exhibition as a whole. This group of large-format, mainly frontal portraits were produced late in Artaud's life, during his time at Rodez and Ivry, between 1946 and his death in early 1948. His face and neck are depicted in heavy, insistent strokes that iterate his features over and over again, scratching and scarring the surface of the paper. In one such portrait, executed at Ivry on June 24 1947 (cat. no. 6), the lines of Artaud's face are overlaid with dark leaden smudges while short incisive lines mark out holes and blemishes on his neck. The page is further subjected to brown stains and the dark scar of a burn is clearly visible close to Artaud's mouth. This damage to the throat and mouth enacts the violent silencing of the artist, who appears in all of the self-portraits with thin closed lips and expressionless eyes, a testament to what Jean-Luc Nancy terms the 'scar of silence.'³ In the same month as he created this work, Artaud described his morbid vision in the text 'Le visage humain...': 'the human face / is an empty force, a / field of death ... For the human face, / in fact, wears / a perpetual death of sorts.'⁴ In the self-portraits the fragmentation of Artaud's own brutally wounded face betrays an impulse that drives relentlessly towards the complete annihilation of the self. Any attempt to view such images as an assertion of Artaud's identity is undermined by the violence to which these drawings have been subjected. The mirrors that were placed in the dimly-lit exhibition space strengthened this assault on the perceptions of the exhibition visitor, reflecting our own face among the many images of his, as if to implicate us in this betrayal of the self.

If this exhibition may be accused of faltering at all, it was through its attempts to reconstitute an identity so defiantly and deliberately fragmented as Artaud's. Moving on from our initial encounter with the sense of dislocation in the first room, we entered the central biographical section, which related the chronology of Artaud's life and introduced those characters who played a significant part in it, including Thévenin, Jacques Rivière, Jean Paulhan, Arthur Adamov, Pierre Loeb, Roger Blin and others. Many of Artaud's doctors and psychiatrists were also present, represented in a somewhat oversimplified fashion by editions of their medical tomes. These were displayed alongside Artaud's lengthy letters to them which hint at the profound personal effect that these figures had on Artaud; in particular, the doctors René Allendy and Gaston Ferdière encouraged his artistic production, provided him with materials and bore some responsibility for ensuring the survival of the resultant works. The strength of Artaud's experiences alone – close involvement with the surrealist movement, his extensive travel, and the horrors of psychiatric incarceration and electro-convulsive therapy – may argue to the inclusion of such a biographically oriented section. The room was curated with a straightforward sensitivity to the sometimes shocking material and its display cases combined dry factual accounts with those that hinted at the magnetism that many felt in Artaud's company. The medical details of his diagnosis and treatment were complemented by a mesmerising and animated account by Anaïs Nin of her first meeting of Artaud in the 1920s, introduced by a mutual psychiatrist. There was a noticeable



focus on testimony in this section, though the relics that were displayed alongside these records – Artaud's passport, his identity card, his letters and notebooks – seemed to be intended more as shards of his self, evidence of its being rent apart, rather than as a way of rebuilding him.

The narrative of Artaud's life is, like his work, full of paradoxes and contradictions. In 1936 he visited South America, in order to attend conferences on surrealism at the University of Mexico – on surrealism and revolution, man and his destiny, and the sacred role of the theatre – and subsequently wrote on the subject of the peyote-infused rituals of the Tarahumara. The impression that emerges at this point of a highly engaged intellectual fascinated by the customs of another culture is typical of the extremely lucid theoretical output of much of Artaud's early life. Such work seems anathema, however, to those relics of the following year, when Artaud made his infamously ill-fated journey to Ireland, returning under detention to the asylum at Rodez. It is from this period, starting in late 1937, that the *Spells* date, frenzied missives addressed to Artaud's friends and enemies, real and imagined, calling for their protection or punishment, and begging them to come to his aid and bring drugs. Initially the pages are arranged as letters accompanied by symbolic imagery, but these rapidly merge to produce ambiguous works that are extremely theatrical, mixing words and imagery in a layout that hints at some unknown symbolic meaning. Words are capitalised, underlined, arranged into shapes and frequently obscured by smears of ink and burnt holes. The language is dramatic, oscillating wildly between ritual and blasphemy. The violence which was directed towards Artaud in the self-portraits is now directed out towards the pathology of society as a whole. At the Bibliothèque nationale, held caught in plexiglas against the light, as if being read by their recipients, the fragility of these pages was made clear. The text on one side became visible through the thin paper, working to obliterate its verso in a manner that replicated in the viewing process that which Artaud enacted in the making.

The violently performative aesthetic of the *Spells* continues in the notebooks that Artaud produced at Rodez and Ivry. In ruled school exercise books Artaud expounds often illegible ideas, frequently revisiting and revising earlier theoretical work. The notebooks' pages are often extremely incoherent, filled with metaphoric words that invoke sex, sacrifice, scatology and physical brutality, and that frequently break out of conventional syntax and meaning into the realm of glossolalia. Artaud's handwriting moves along in scrawled lines at all angles across the page, underlined, scratched out, rewritten, and frequently overlapped by hasty sketches and diagrams in dark pencil. Writing is made spatial and voluminous, a performative (that is, theatrical in Artaud's sense) gesture of negation. Though emerging from language and visual imagery, the resulting pages effect the annulment of both: the act of writing against the text in order to dislocate its hold over meaning. Julia Kristeva's psycholinguistic analysis of Artaud as being 'in conflict and thus in dialectic with himself,'⁵ seemed especially pertinent when one was confronted with the visual and linguistic contradictions and internal discord of the notebooks on display. The merging of word and image into pictogram may be seen as



an attempt to escape the confines of language, an urgent drive towards the pre-symbolic, that primal state in which true communication might happen. The frequent appearance in the notebooks of imagery resembling internal organs, vertebrae and shattered bones, as well as the proliferation of nails, dagger-like forms and shattered and impaled figures indicate that, for Artaud, this rupture is situated in the violent crisis of the human body. The violence invoked in Artaud's words is enacted on the surface of the paper, which becomes analogous to the wounded skin of the body, here, as in the drawings.

Many of the late notebooks echo those theories Artaud had developed in the realm of theatre in the 1920s and 1930s and the exhibition contained a remarkable wealth of early material relating to these texts, for which Artaud was best known for several decades. Letters, scripts, performance photographs, and illustrations of set and costume designs outlined Artaud's early experimental work with the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, which he founded in 1926 with Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron and with the support of Yvonne Allendy, and which demonstrated a decidedly dadaist impulse. The revolutionary spirit of the 'real,' situated beyond the perceived artificiality of theatrical convention, would prefigure the more radical agenda of Artaud's 1935 play *Les Cenci*, and his two manifestoes outlining the 'Theatre of Cruelty,' published in *The Theatre and Its Double* in 1938 (not to mention the numerous attempts in the 1950s and 60s to 'blur the boundaries of art and life'). In this now famous text, it is language that once again structures the constraints which Artaud is trying to escape. He argues for an end to the closed circuit of conventional theatrical representation, in which actors repeat the prescribed words and actions detailed in the text of the script; in its place he outlines a form of theatre that 'furnishes the spectator with the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and even matter, even his cannibalism, pour out on a level not counterfeit and illusory but interior.'⁶ The nature of Artaud's project emerges as necessarily all-consuming. A drawing of March 1946, also titled *The Theatre of Cruelty*, depicts elongated and blemished figures in long coffin-like shapes covered in unexplained markings; jutting out at irregular angles, one upside down, they are situated in a void, the visual embodiment of the 'dynamic expression in space' which Artaud craves.⁷ Once again, though, there was a striking tension between the coherence of the almost-finished drafts of plays and theoretical texts and the chaos that appeared to dominate the drawings that followed them. In fact, many of the projects that constituted this section of the exhibition were aborted. Artaud would never succeed in fully realising his vision of the 'theatre of cruelty,' though his text would eventually become one of the most important sources for performers and artists in both Europe and America.

The immediacy that Artaud had demanded in the theatre is apparent too in his writing on cinema. Between 1924 and 1935 Artaud wrote fifteen film scenarios and appeared as an actor in twenty-two films, both mainstream and experimental. In addition, he produced a significant amount of theoretical



work outlining the potential of the medium to reconstitute the visceral and violent process of dreaming by projecting visual sensations (Artaud's film theory was rooted in the technology of silent films) in direct collision with the eyes of the spectator. This 'raw cinema' as he envisioned it would overwhelm its viewer with an accumulation of imagery, a cinematic immolation.⁸ Artaud's 1926 film *The Seashell and the Clergyman*, shown in the exhibition in its entirety, was supposed to be the concrete realisation of these ambitions, and though the resulting creation of its director Germaine Dulac displeased Artaud, it became one of the most important examples of surrealist film. This was shown in the exhibition alongside extracts of films in which Artaud performed, most famously as Marat in Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1926) and the monk Massieu in Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1927). We were not discouraged in this exhibition from confusing the films in which Artaud starred with the scenarios that he wrote, the mainstream movies with the more experimental productions. Indeed, ironically, it was the intensity of Artaud's wild eyes and tortured expression as an actor – his face frozen for a moment as the section of film looped in repeated denial of the unique encounter he invoked – that imparted to the exhibition viewer the closest thing to the cruelty he sought in his fragmented writing on cinema.

Similarly, it was a little misrepresentative at times that no distinction was made between the private writings and sketches that Artaud made – partly as a form of therapy encouraged by the various doctors – and those that he produced with a view to public exhibition. This was particularly noticeable in the case of the late drawings that would go on display at the Galerie Pierre, Paris, in July 1947. This confusion, lessened somewhat by the comprehensive exhibition catalogue, was surely the result not only of the sheer variety of material on display, but also of the largely successful attempt to make a valid connection between the lucid theories of Artaud's early theatre works, and the impenetrable scribbles of his final years. Chronological development was largely eschewed in favour of thematic parallels and medium-based distinctions.

The temptation to consider Artaud's prolific output in terms of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* informed by his psychological disarray has been a common one for curators and scholars of Artaud's work: the disjunction between critical and clinical commentaries has been difficult to resolve. Many commentaries, however critical, invite a reception that has at its core the notion that his work is, as Susan Sontag asserted in 1976, intrinsically unreadable.⁹ The Bibliothèque nationale, however, successfully reached beyond the limitations of such an interpretation. The exhibition pointedly enacted the sense of frustration and failure that permeates Artaud's many unrealised projects, and successfully brought out the more subtle strands that run through his oeuvre. Rather than attempting to resolve the various contradictions in his work and life, the organisers of the exhibition adopted cacophony as a deliberate curatorial strategy in order to overcome the paradox inherent in exhibiting Artaud's work. Quotations from his writings were reproduced over the walls, floor and ceiling of the exhibition space,



in varying colours and sizes, sometimes appearing forceful, at others faint and pleading, attempting to escape the imposed silence articulated by the self-portraits. On one occasion Artaud declared: 'Je suis vacant par stupéfaction de ma langue' ('I am made empty by the stupefaction of my tongue'). Overhead, speakers projected the sound of his voice, veering from dramatic ranting to soft and enticing muttering, making literal the 'cries, groans, apparitions' of Artaud's theatre of cruelty.¹⁰ Fragments of language drifted through the gallery, jostling with the visual images and text on display in its cases. Here, Derrida's analysis of 'writing as the other of the living body [...] the erasure of the body' seems to have found its expression.¹¹ By bombarding the museum visitor with sound, text, and still and moving images, this exhibition hinted at that point of primacy that Artaud sought, 'the borderline of the moment when the word has not yet been born, when articulation is not longer a shout but not yet a discourse.'¹²

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¹ Antonin Artaud, 'Mes dessins ne sont pas dessins...', [April 1946], trans. Roger McKeon, reproduced in Margit Rowell (ed.), *Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper*, New York, 1996.

² André Breton, 'Homage to Antonin Artaud,' [1946], in Edward Scheer (ed.), *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader*, London and New York, 2004, 14 (originally published as 'Hommage à Antonin Artaud,' in *La clé des champs*, Paris, 1967).

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Le visage plaqué sur la face d'Artaud,' in *Antonin Artaud*, Paris, 2006, 12.

⁴ Antonin Artaud, 'Le visage humain...' [June 1947], reproduced in Rowell (ed.), *Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper*, 94-95.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'The subject in process' [1972], in Scheer (ed.), *Antonin Artaud: A Critical Reader*, 119. This text was originally a paper given at the 1972 conference 'Artaud / Bataille: Towards a Cultural Revolution.' It was subsequently published in *Tel Quel*, 52-53 (1973).

⁶ Antonin Artaud, 'The Theater of Cruelty,' in *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, New York, 1958, 92.

⁷ Antonin Artaud, 'The Theater of Cruelty,' 89.

⁸ Antonin Artaud, 'Sorcellerie et Cinéma,' [1927], *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. III, Paris, 1961, 66.

⁹ Susan Sontag, 'Approaching Artaud' [1973], in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, New York, 1980, 69. This essay was written to introduce the *Selected Writings of Antonin Artaud*, New York, 1976.

¹⁰ Antonin Artaud, 'The Theater of Cruelty,' 93.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,' in *Writing and Difference* [1967], trans. Alan Bass, London, 2001, 312.

¹² Jacques Derrida, 'The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,' 302.

