Life in the Shadows: Towards a Queer Artaud

Lucy Bradnock

Abstract

This essay resituates the early reception of Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* within the framework of the untitled theatrical event that John Cage and David Tudor organised at Black Mountain College in the summer of 1952, and the writing of Antonin Artaud that was its inspiration. Artaud's polemical theatre manifesto *Le Théâtre et son double*, the English translation of which was begun by the poet M. C. Richards at Black Mountain College in the first years of the 1950s, proposes a shifting position outside of the constraints of conventional signification, and rejects the authority of the text as epitomising a 'petrified idea of a culture without shadows.' Drawing on queer theory, I propose an account of Cage's encounter with Artaud that emphasises cacophony, unrepeatability, and the queer potential offered by the ungraspable shadow. In offering a reading that is based on a queering of Artaud's notion of 'cruelty,' this paper seeks to expand the Duchampian model offered by Moira Roth's 'aesthetic of indifference' and Jonathan D. Katz's 'politics of negation'; the sense of plenitude, immediacy and unrepeatability to be found in these works is less Duchampian, I argue, than it is an articulation of Artaud's 'space stocked with silence.'

So many points of view, so many details …
are probably significant.
John Ashbery, 'Litany'[1]

Robert Rauschenberg's 1953 exhibition at the Stable Gallery, New York, figures prominently in narratives of the post-war 'neo-avant-garde.' The complex significance that has been retrospectively accorded the exhibition belies the apparent simplicity of the paintings on show – canvasses covered in an even layer of white paint, applied with a roller. Rauschenberg had completed the *White Paintings* in October 1951, during a sojourn at Black Mountain College, an experimental liberal arts college near Asheville, North Carolina (Fig. 1). There, the initial reaction of his peers had been to relate the works to the monochrome of the historical avant-garde, 'which has never meant much of anything to anybody except possibly as a step in art history, as a Mallowitch [sic] white on white which you can't see as a painting.'[2] In New York, a contemporary critical review of the exhibition levelled accusations of 'dada shenanigans,' the iconoclastic stunt of an artist who declared himself that the works were 'not Art.'[3] The weary reviewer, confronted with works 'beyond the artistic pale,' professed bafflement: 'a blank canvas provokes a blank look.'[4] Since then, the *White Paintings* have been characterised variously in the considerable literature devoted to them as modernist monochromes, anti-authorial gestures, responses to the carnage of war and the atomic age, and articulations of Bergsonian duration.[5] They are repeatedly situated within the trajectory of the pre-war avant-garde, still often regarded as descendants of Kasimir Malevich's *White on White* (1918); they have been related, albeit by negation, to Surrealism;[6] most commonly they are labelled as 'neo-Dada.' What most commentators appear to agree on is that the *White Paintings* are, above everything, Duchampian.

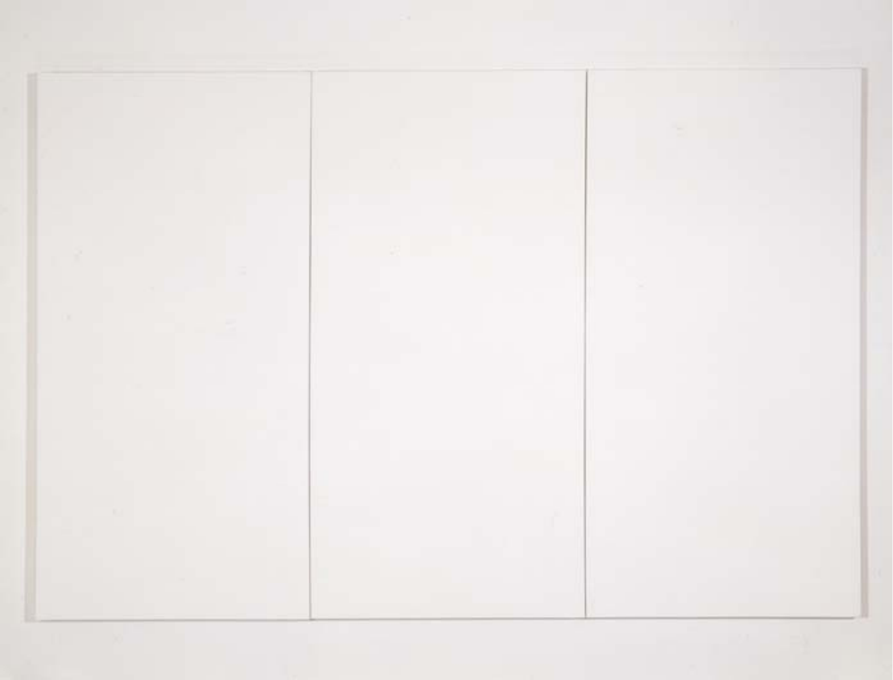

Fig. 1: Robert Rauschenberg, *White Painting (Three Panel),* 1951, Oil on canvas, 72 in. x 108 in, (182.88 cm x 274.32 cm), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchased through a gift of Phyllis Wattis, © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

Perhaps most influential in the way in which scholars have situated the *White Paintings* has been the perspective of Rauschenberg's friend and colleague John Cage, whose words inevitably tend to be conflated with those of his younger colleague. Two statements predominate: the first, written at the time of the Stable Gallery exhibition; and the second, in 1961, on the occasion of the exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The earlier statement I shall return to later in its entirety, but for now its final line will suffice to indicate the kind of terminology that has come to inform writing on these works: 'I have come to the conclusion,' Cage wrote, 'that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows.'[7] Contained within Cage's sentence are those ideas of presence and absence, light and shadow, sight and non-sight, change and stasis that have since dominated the literature on the *White Paintings*. Cage's 1961 statement is equally enigmatic; in the text 'On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work,' Cage declares them to be ‘airports for the lights, shadows and particles.’[8] It is a phrase that has been taken implicitly to invoke the figure of Marcel Duchamp, whose own experiments with glass and shadows have been retrospectively mapped onto Rauschenberg’s canvases, largely as a result of Cage’s pronouncement. Hovering over the critical reception of Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* is the Duchampian spectre of *Dust Breeding*, specks of accidental dirt on the surface of Duchamp’s *Large Glass* raised to the status of shadowy peaks by Man Ray’s camera. It is a comparison that has increasingly coalesced into a solid model of interpretation, and one that I set out to dispel here, by letting the shadow of Antonin Artaud, rather than that of Duchamp, fall on the surface of the *White Paintings*.

As Branden Joseph has demonstrated, a significant shift occurred in the discursive framework within which the *White Paintings* were defined in the years immediately following their completion, even before their first public exhibition at the Stable Gallery.[9] Although that exhibition was the first public display of the *White Paintings*, an earlier point of reception can most probably be dated to the previous summer, at Black Mountain College, by virtue of the role that they played in a multi-media performance event that was organised there by John Cage and David Tudor. Sometimes referred to as *Theatre Piece No. 1*, though even this seems uncertain, it is a work that has attained a near-mythical status. Multi-media and collaborative in nature, it combined performances by some of the best-known names associated not only with the 1952 Summer Session, but with the history of Black Mountain College as a whole. In the forward to his 1961 anthology *Silence*, Cage recalled the event’s components:

> [It] involved the paintings of Bob Rauschenberg, the dancing of Merce Cunningham, films, slides, phonograph records, radios, the poetries of Charles Olson and M.C. Richards recited from the tops of ladders, and the pianism of David Tudor, together with my Juilliard lecture.[10]

Each participant contributed a performance of their choice within specified time frames issued to them just prior to the start of the event. Cage’s brief catalogue indicates the participants’ inter-disciplinary ambitions: it includes paintings, dance, film, slides, spoken poetry and prose, live piano performance, and pre-recorded sound played on both records and radio. The Rauschenberg paintings to which Cage refers are, most likely, the *White Paintings*. According to the majority of contemporary accounts of the event, they were suspended above the audience in the College’s dining hall (though their exact arrangement is unclear) and used for the projection of slides, or possibly fragments of black and white 8mm film by Nicholas Cernovitch. Most subsequent attempts to pin down the exact sequence of the proceedings have been predicated on a 1965 interview with Cage conducted by Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner and published in the *Tulane Drama Review*.[11] In the main, however, scholars have struggled even to grasp hold of the event’s most basic features. Though the work is almost universally hailed as a defining moment in the development of performance art, 'mixed means' theatre, and Cage's own theories of chance composition and indeterminacy, its fundamental features remain contested: its title (if there was one); its length; its components; even the date, probably in the latter half of August, though remarkably unrecorded, even in a community brimming with amateur diarists. With no conventional script or musical score, the slips of paper listing time frames during which participants were instructed to 'play freely,' constituted the only documentation of the performance; only one is extant.[12]

If the *White Paintings* are my intended protagonists, then the untitled event that took place in the Black Mountain College dining hall in August 1952 is their setting. It is not my intention to attempt to map the event as a coherent entity; that task has been admirably undertaken already by William Fetterman, whose 1995 study *John Cage's Theatre Pieces. Notations and Performances* remains the most comprehensive record of its logistics.[13] What emerge most clearly from his account, based on contemporary diary entries and retrospective oral history interviews, are the discrepancies that exist within and between those accounts and the resulting impossibility of pinning down what actually occurred. No doubt some of these inconsistencies must be put down to the usual lapses of memory, the relative scarcity of photographic documentation (though photography as an artistic discipline was strong at Black Mountain College), and the fact that much of the significance accorded the evening's entertainment has been retrospective.[14] Nevertheless, it seems that the particular difficulty that scholars encounter in this case may be borne of more than the usual challenges of recording performance. That the work in question is resistant to quantitative categorisation at every stage – it is without script or documentation, without name and without medium specificity – places it in an unusual critical void. Variously yet unsatisfactorily characterised retrospectively as 'a seminal event,' an 'ur-Happening,' as 'mixed means theater,' experimental theatre, or as a musical composition, it sits uncomfortably in any of these definitions.[15]

In seeking a more convincing reason for these discrepancies, it is my intention to consider the event as a work that deliberately defers categorisation, refusing a place in the structures of critical discourse through its situation in the mode of the unrepeatable, the unrecordable and the unnamable. This refusal of categorisation engenders a state of contingency that, I shall argue, characterises Cage's encounter with the work of the French writer Antonin Artaud. For what is uncontested is that Cage and Tudor took their inspiration for the event from Artaud. Cage himself has made clear the role that Artaud's book *Le Théâtre et son double* played in the conception of the work. In a 1969 interview with Martin Duberman, Cage explains:

> I was under the influence of that text of Artaud. Which M.C. Richards translated. And which had been brought to my attention by Pierre Boulez …David Tudor and I and MC were reading Artaud constantly. And it was the influence that led to that event, which is

> called the first happening. Because Artaud postulates … the centricity within each event and its non-dependence on other events.[16]

Given the prominence of the 1952 event in the short time frame between Rauschenberg's completion of the *White Paintings* and their exhibition in New York, the absence of Artaud in Branden Joseph's account of their early reception – which finds inspiration for the paintings in László Maholy-Nagy, Henri Bergson, and Marcel Duchamp – is puzzling. For it was in that Artaud-inspired theatre that the works encountered the most literal embodiment of the positive matter of emptiness and the play of shadows that Cage would highlight in his text for the Stable Gallery the following year. Despite the very real probability of their physical inclusion in the proceedings at Black Mountain, the presence of Artaud's name and the radical model of *The Theater and Its Double* during the first period of the *White Paintings*' early critical reception remains unacknowledged, eclipsed by predominantly Duchampian readings. It is this lacuna that I wish to address here, by considering the discursive shift that the paintings underwent as one brought about by Cage's refiguring of the paintings as part of an Artaudian theatrical experiment. In other words, what if the shadows that play across the surface of Rauschenberg's blank canvases are Artaudian, rather than Duchampian?

At stake here is the recuperation of an early reception history for Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*. But beyond this, the nature of Cage's reading of Artaud is intriguing, given that Artaud plays a significant role in the formation of Cage's theories of indeterminacy, theories that found their first real articulation in that 1952 event. If, as several scholars have suggested, Cage's radical redefinition of compositional agency carries an implicit challenge to the construction of subjectivity and identity, then the presence of Artaud in his early experiments with indeterminate performance is crucial. For Jonathan D. Katz, Cage's challenge to the defined boundaries of identity is one that is articulated in terms of queer sexuality. Thus, for Katz, the silence at the core of Cage's *4'33"* and the absence at work in Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* is a queer one.[17] Though Katz's reading is not unproblematic, the theoretical framework that underpins it offers a useful vocabulary with which to speak about Cage's encounter with Artaud. It is my aim to excavate an Artaudian context for the *White Paintings*, and to understand the specific nature of Artaudian 'cruelty' as it was manifested through their reception at Black Mountain College. If Rauschenberg's canvases are filled with the cacophony of Artaud (as opposed to the silence of Duchamp), I shall ask, how might Katz's terminology enable us to think through the 'cruelty' of the *White Paintings*; and how might we understand Cage's reading of Artaud in light of the queerness that Katz claims is at play? What emerges is a vision of Artaud that goes far beyond practical theatre manual, and begins to occupy a position that might be termed queer.

From Paris to Asheville

In all probability, John Cage's first encounter with the name of Antonin Artaud occurred in Paris in 1949, during a trip to Europe funded by the National Academy of Arts and Letters and the Guggenheim Foundation. In fact, just as Cage left New York on 23 March of that year, the magazine of art and literature *The Tiger's Eye* released its latest issue, which included Artaud's *Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society* alongside Cage's article 'Forerunners of Modern Music.'[18] It is just conceivable that Cage would have read through his complimentary copy of the magazine prior to his departure. More likely, it just missed him and this early juxtaposition of Cage and Artaud in print remains a curious instance of historical happenstance. On his arrival in Paris, Cage introduced himself to the French composer Pierre Boulez; the two composers found much common ground. Boulez's *Second Piano Sonata*, completed the previous year, had drawn inspiration from Artaud in its rejection of melodic and thematic conventions, and Artaud was a familiar name to the intellectual circle into which Cage was rapidly admitted. Among its most well-known members were the composer Messiaen, the painter Bernard Soby, playwright Armand Gatti, novelist Pierre Jouffroy, and the Russian critic and musicologist Pierre Souvtchinsky. Belonging to an older generation, Souvtchinsky had participated in the first performance of *Les Cenci* in 1935, giving him direct practical experience of Artaud's theatrical model as well as close personal links to Artaud himself.[19] After his return to New York in November 1949, Cage maintained an affectionate friendship with Souvtchinsky, who provided an informed link with the Paris circle.

More directly influential would be Cage's relationship with Boulez. The two composers would exchange a series of lengthy letters between 1949 and 1954, swapping detailed explanatory notes on compositional strategies and influences.[20] Boulez visited Cage in New York in November 1949, making the acquaintance of David Tudor and M.C. Richards, both also at Black Mountain College. Towards the end of 1950, Tudor began to prepare for his performance of the American premiere of Boulez's *Second Piano Sonata* in a concert of the League of Composers in New York. In a letter to Boulez dated 18 December, Cage recounts his colleague's ambition to gain a deeper understanding of the piece by reading Boulez's articles in the contemporary music journals *Contrepoint* and *Polyphonie*, no small undertaking since it required Tudor to learn to read French.[21] In the latter, in an article entitled 'Propositions,' Tudor read the following sentence: 'I think that music should be a collective hysteria and magic, violently modern – along the lines of Antonin Artaud and not in the sense of a simple ethnographic reconstruction in the image of civilizations more or less remote from us.'[22] It seems that Tudor responded to Boulez's statement by conducting additional research. For, as Cage writes in the December letter to Boulez, Tudor had embarked upon 'a collection and study of Artaud.'[23] Since, at that time, the publication of Artaud's work in translation in America was limited to the piece in *The Tiger's Eye* and another in the Parisian transatlantic journal *Transition*, Tudor resorted to copying laboriously on his typewriter the French text of *Le Théâtre et son double* from a borrowed Gallimard copy. Just five months later, in May 1951, Cage reported to Boulez his own engagement with Artaud: 'I have been reading a great deal of Artaud (this is largely because of you and through Tudor who read Artaud because of you).'[24]

It was shortly after Cage's second letter that M.C. Richards, a poet and teacher of literature, drama and creative writing at Black Mountain College, Chair of the Faculty between 1949 and 1951, and Tudor's partner, would begin a translation into English of *Le Théâtre et son Double*. In fact, Richards had encountered Artaud's name by another route, through the work of the French actor-director Jean-Louis Barrault, an accomplished mime artist, theatre director and disciple of Artaud's. Richards had seen Barrault perform in a production of André Gide's translation of Hamlet, while she was staying in Paris in the Spring and Summer of 1948. The sojourn had offered her an opportunity to immerse herself in French culture and to learn the language, though she found upon her arrival a city in which 'there are so many Americans … that one has a hard time sometimes feeling as if one were in a foreign country.'[25] Despite her regretful conclusion that 'the French avant-garde art and theater and philosophy is the concern primarily of a few cafés in Paris,' she rigorously practised the language in order better to absorb the country's literature.[26] Frequent letters home attest to the ambitious reading matter of one rapidly improving in the French language: read in their original language, Camus, Flaubert, and Eluard provided linguistic training and the desired cultural authenticity. Back at Black Mountain, Richards read Barrault's *Reflections on Theatre* as soon as it was published in 1951. Barrault devotes an entire chapter to Artaud, whom he terms 'the royal representative of [an] anarchist nobility,' embarking on a lengthy description of Artaud's appearance and persona that verges on the romantic.[27] Asserting that *Le Théâtre et son Double* 'should be read again and again,' Barrault includes it in a list of five works that he recommends to young actors.[28] Richards has recalled her determination to read Artaud and the difficulty that she encountered in sourcing copies of his work in America in 1951: 'I plainly owed it to myself to inform myself about Artaud. It wasn't easy in those days … to find anything by him in the US. And it is significant, I think, that when I did locate a copy, it had been typed by a musician from a paperback imported by a dancer.'[29] In response to her queries, Tudor had written from his tour in November 1951, directing her to his typescript, tucked away, 'in a small envelope … somewhere in the front room.'[30]

Richards' translation, though not published in full until 1958, was begun in earnest in the months following her temporary departure from the permanent faculty of Black Mountain College in 1951.[31] Contrary to Mike Sell's assertion that 'cruelty' landed on American shores in the spring of 1958,' a considerable part of the text was available at Black Mountain College long before the general public would open the cover of Grove Press's book *The Theatre and Its Double*.[32] By the summer of 1952, she had completed a sufficient quantity of the translation to give a reading from it at both Black Mountain College and at the Artists Club in New York.[33] Correspondence between Charles Olson, the Black Mountain College rector, and Cid Corman, the poet publisher of *Origin*, indicates that Richards had all but finished a first draft of the entire translation by 1953, though Corman, who was more proficient than she in French and had intended to translate the work himself, was disparaging, labelling it 'rather inept,' its sentences 'awkward or sometimes incoherent.'[34] He published part of it, nonetheless, in the eleventh issue of *Origin*.[35] By 1955, Richards listed the 'complete translation' of *The Theater and Its Double* in the 'unpublished works' section of her curriculum vitae.[36] It is likely that Richards' interpretation of Artaud's text during the early years of the 1950s, when she, Tudor and Cage 'were reading Artaud constantly,' was still coloured by the words of Barrault, whose chapter on Artaud concluded with the vision of a 'Total Theatre: a Concerto for Man.' According to Barrault's model, drawn from Artaud, the actor takes on the role of instrument, creating music through gesture 'carried to the extreme limit of its capacity,' combined with breath, cries and vocal articulation.[37] It is a description that no doubt held some currency in the first stages of their interpretation of the Artaud text, and one that chimes with the *mise-en-scène* that they would create in the College dining hall during the Summer of 1952.

Richards's translation of Artaud fell on fertile ground at Black Mountain, not least due to the radical nature of the institution itself. Despite its geographical isolation in a remote part of North Carolina, it was by the turn of the decade acknowledged as an out-crop of the New York artistic avant-garde. The day-to-day operational mode of the College was characterised by an uncompromising belief in radical non-hierarchy, resulting in a richly collaborative atmosphere and an organisational infrastructure that was frequently frustratingly indecisive. The College's prospectus for the Spring 1952 semester stresses its ongoing strategy of moving away from the overriding authority of the teacher figure, towards a situation in which 'the student, rather than the curriculum, is the proper center of a general education.'[38] Unencumbered by the restrictions of a prescribed curriculum that were features of more established higher education institutions, faculty and students at Black Mountain were able to absorb rapidly new theoretical ideas into their artistic and educational project, without such influences being filtered through layers of evaluative bureaucracy. It was, commented Richards, 'a situation where the external restrictions upon human initiative were absent.'[39] The rejection of target-oriented learning allowed a focus on collaborative exchange, typified in Olson's stated belief that 'it is not things in themselves but what happens between things where the life of them is to be sought.'[40] Teaching was conducted primarily through informal study groups. Late night conversations between faculty and students were common, and many alumni of the College have remarked that most of the learning happened outside delineated class-time.

Mark Hedden, a former student, recalled his experiences of theatre at the college in an article he wrote in 1969, coming to the conclusion that ‘much of what was good theater at BMC was unstructured, unstaged, going on regardless of audience or plot.’[41] Drama was, however, a core subject in the college’s programme. It was an area in which the college demonstrated a significant and sustained engagement with experimental practices.[42] The directions of investigation were as eclectic as the changing faculty, but were united by the search for radical new modes of expression, and by the paucity of funds. Often, the latter state of affairs necessitated the advancement of the former. In the years leading up to John Cage’s performance event, there was experimental dance, including workshops and performances by Kathy Litz and Merce Cunningham, and chanting led by Nataraj Vashi. Theatrical productions by staff and student productions included plays by Ibsen, Cocteau, Yeats and Brecht, as well as the more experimental pieces contrived by the Light Sound Movement workshop during the 1949-50 school year. [43] The August 1948 production of Erik Satie’s surrealist play *The Ruse of Medusa*, translated by M.C. Richards, incorporated improvisational work into the rehearsals, though its adherence to a script and reliance on proscenium staging placed it fairly firmly in traditional realms. It points to an increasing interest in avant-garde French sources, a charge led by John Cage, who delivered his notorious lecture ‘Defense of Satie,’ as part of a Summer Session that year devoted entirely to the work of the French composer.[44] Their varying degrees of radicality notwithstanding, all of these projects contributed to the development of a drama programme that had deeply experimental ambitions. Though the extent to which the 1952 event continued those ideas present in these earlier theatrical experiments is debateable, it is certain that the staff and students were not unused to theatrical experimentation, nor to drawing on European sources for inspiration.[45] For a group of people well versed in the ideas of the Bauhaus and of Dada, Artaud would not have seemed a vast leap. For Martin Duberman, the Satie Festival heralded the arrival of a distinctly American phase at Black Mountain College, following what he terms the ‘New England-Germanic’ climate under the rectorship of Joseph Albers. The college, he states, ‘became for the first time since its inception – and, in an important sense, for the first time ever – a decidedly American, and a decidedly radical environment.’[46] But it would seem that in Satie, and later in Artaud, this ‘decidedly American’ sensibility found a specifically French inspiration.

‘When John did that thing’:[47] the untitled event of 1952

Hedden’s statement that the most innovative theatre at Black Mountain was ‘going on regardless of audience or plot’ was written in 1969 at a moment when Happenings dominated the art world. Hedden’s focus on the performative actions of everyday life shares much with the writing of Happenings artists like Allan Kaprow. Performance, for Hedden, was to be found in ‘walking out … to the exact center of a circular grass plot behind the kitchen and sitting down …. The talk at table, the pick-up softball games on Sunday, the parties, dances in the cavernous dining hall ….'[48] His rhetoric finds echoes, too, in Richard Kostelanetz's 1968 study of the new theatrical phenomenon that he termed the 'theater of mixed means.'[49] Its origins Kostelanetz locates in Cage's event at Black Mountain College, behind which he finds the European influence of Futurism, Dada, the Bauhaus and surrealism. His analysis draws out a broad refutation of 'Renaissance-style' theatrical conventions. It is a stance present in Cage's identification of Artaud as a direct source. Cage offers the following explanation of the nature of the inspiration that he and Tudor found in *The Theater and Its Double*:

> We got the idea from Artaud that theater could take place free of a text, that if a text were in it, that it needn't determine the other actions, that sounds, that activities, and so forth, could all be free rather than tied together … so that the audience was not focused in one particular direction.[50]

Thus his 1952 theatrical event is no less unstaged, albeit rather more deliberate, than the aimless wander that Mark Hedden evokes. Hedden's assertion that the best theatre at the College took place 'regardless of plot' could apply equally to Cage's event. The freedom from a pre-determined text, or script, liberated the work from sequential narrative development or the psychological logic of characterisation; it dispensed with the requirement that one thing follow directly from another, allowing instead for a scenario in which the disconnection of elements permitted escape from a singular focus of audience attention.

This freedom from focus was further manifested in the unconventional arrangement of the dining hall, a sort of theatre in the round, adapted so that the action penetrated the space of the audience. While the 1948 performance of Erik Satie's *The Ruse of Medusa* had taken place on a raised stage in front of an audience in auditorium rows, those that witnessed the 1952 event did so from different angles. Richards recalls an audience of between thirty-five and fifty staff and students, in a complex seating arrangement that Cage describes as follows in the 1965 interview:

> The seating arrangement I had at Black Mountain in 1952 was a square composed of four triangles with the apexes of the triangles merging towards the center, but not meeting. The center was a larger space that could take movement, and the aisles between these four triangles also admitted movement. The audience could see itself, which is of course the advantage of any theater in the round. The larger part of the action took place *outside* of that square.[51]

Cage's description is accompanied by a diagram that indicates a mutually penetrative relationship between performers and audience, with the seats jutting into the stage space and the aisles turned into spaces of action. The physical distribution of performers around the space of the dining hall at Black Mountain College functions to facilitate the independent action of each performer, allowing multiple centres of theatrical attention. A second schematic representation, drawn by Richards in 1989, emphasises the way in which the action occurred on all sides of the audience, who are placed in a central position. The disruption of a single point of meaning is thus enacted on two fronts: the dispersal of the performers as well as that of the audience. The action is not only spread horizontally around the hall, but also vertically, by means of a ladder, a lectern, and paintings hung above the audience.[52] Viewers craning their necks to take in those elements not at eye level might miss Merce Cunningham dancing past, or the sight of Tudor on the piano; anyone intent on making out the words spoken by one of the poets, or by Cage himself, or keen to hum along to the piano or phonograph would be frustrated, for no single part was discernable in the cacophonic whole. The number of possible experiences goes far beyond the number of chairs in the auditorium, since it depends to such an extent on the actions and attitude of the viewer. Multiple centres of performance are viewed from a potentially infinite number of perspectives.

For Cage, this radical dispersal of the space of performance served to counter the single centre traditionally offered by the proscenium stage and embodied in the figure of the conductor and the hierarchy of the orchestra. The multiple focus as a means of breaking from the restrictive harmonic conventions of the European ensemble is an Artaudian strategy that Boulez had adopted in the *Second Piano Sonata*, in which 'there are no principal parts, no secondary parts,' and that he had passed on to Cage.[53] Artaud's call for a radical reappraisal of the performance space 'utilized in all its dimensions and … on all possible planes,' belongs to his rejection of an Occidental theatre that is still tied to the notion of a performed text. His demand to end the subjugation of the theatre to the text of a pre-determined script proposes a new mode of expression, one that 'cannot be defined except by its possibilities for *dynamic expression in space* as opposed to the expressive possibilities of spoken dialogue.'[54] An undulating hand-drawn line in the upper region of Richards' sketch indicates the dynamism of the event. The faltering outlines with which she designates the individual performer's positions not only suggest a more hasty demonstration but also echo the confusing plenitude of movement and sound that characterises audience accounts. Her sketchiness may indicate more than the vagueness engendered by time; indeed many contemporary accounts also reveal a state of uncertainty regarding its exact sequence. The potter Karen Karnes' recollection that 'we didn't know what was going on,' is typical of the audience's bewildered response.[55] Suffice it to say, as Karnes did, that the 'dining room was set up in some other way,' and that this *some other way* characterised Cage and Tudor's Artaudian ambitions for the event as a whole.[56] Karnes' phrase is inadvertently revealing, suggesting an alternative to the norm, a way that is deliberately other. As such, it will become particularly significant in my later discussion of Cage's reading of Artaud in terms of a queer positioning. For now, it will suffice to keep in mind the physical implications of this *some other way*, and their links with Artaud's radical theatrical model.

At the most basic level, Cage and Richards' verbal and diagrammatic descriptions demonstrate a direct correlation between the elements that constituted the event and the explicit staging directions outlined by Artaud in *The Theater and its Double*. On a logistical level, it would seem, Cage approached the book partly as a practical manifesto for creating the *mise-en-scène*. Artaud's 'Theater of Cruelty' calls for a scenario in which 'the spectator is in the center and the spectacle surrounds him.'[57] It is a sentiment that could equally describe the arrangement in the dining hall and Black Mountain College. Artaud continues to explain that 'in this spectacle the sonorisation is constant.'[58] He demands the simultaneous presentation of sound, light and actions, chosen not for their representational potential but for their ability to act as pure forces that can invigorate both actor and audience:

> Thus, on the one hand, the mass and extent of a spectacle addressed to the entire organism; on the other, an intensive mobilization of objects, gestures, and signs, used in a new spirit. … Words say little to the mind; extent and objects speak; new images speak, even new images made with words. But space thundering with images and crammed with sounds speaks too, if one knows how to intersperse from time to time a sufficient extent of space stocked with silence and immobility.[59]

The Black Mountain College dining hall was just such a space 'thundering with images and crammed with sounds.' A cacophonous plenitude of sound greeted an audience simultaneously bombarded with the sound of Cage, Richards and Olson's recitations, Tudor's piano, Rauschenberg's phonograph, not to mention the sounds generated by the dancing Cunningham, the whirr of the slide projector and the sound of poets' feet climbing and descending the ladder. Cacophony, a state that is etymologically deemed negative, instead offered the immense freedom of non-hierarchy, non-representationality, and indeterminacy.

From Artaud to 'Indeterminacy'

John Cage's 'Juilliard lecture' proclaims the composer's ambition to free himself from his own preconceived notions of the nature of a sound through the kind of spontaneous listening that was evident in the Black Mountain dining hall that summer. 'With contemporary music,' he states, 'there is no time to do anything like classifying. All you can do is suddenly listen, in the same way that when you catch cold all you can do is suddenly sneeze.'[60] This resistance to categorisation is also key to the 1952 event, as William Fetterman has shown. There is something amiss in accounts of the Black Mountain event; but our difficulty in apprehending it is not simply due to the discrepancies between various recollections. There is at play an unsettling disjunction between the seeming usefulness of particular details (the ladder, the diagrammatic descriptions of layout, the specificity of the time frames), and the lacunae that still inhibit our access to meaning. We can imagine the sound of Olsen pulling his large frame up the ladder, but are at a loss to know what he read, or what Tudor played. There was (and still is) 'no time to do anything like classifying,' for the meaning of the work is situated not in the performers' individual words, notes, or movements, but in the indeterminacy that is created from their superimposition. The work takes meaning from just that state of incoherence, created not only by its participants, but also by the audience as they struggle to fix on a single meaning or voice and, with varying degrees of speed, give up that enterprise. Though inspired by Artaud's mistrust of the script, the work does not simply dispense with the written word; in fact it is full of them. But speech, read from a script (most obviously in the case of Cage, Richards and Olsen) becomes noise. The work thematises the abandonment of the script through the mode of indeterminacy manifested in aural plenitude. That is to say, in place of the representation of characters through symbol or metaphor, the work opens up an infinite field of shifting meaning that escapes fixity and thus retains vitality. It is a manoeuvre that embodies Artaud's call,

> [to] make the language express what it does not ordinarily express: to make use of it in a new, exceptional, and unaccustomed fashion; to reveal its possibilities for producing a physical shock; to divide and distribute it evenly in space; to deal with intonations in an absolutely concrete manner, restoring their power to shatter as well as really to manifest something.[61]

What the audience at Black Mountain College encountered, and were implicated in, was the incantatory anarchy of Artaud's model of a 'Theatre of Cruelty.' For Cage, as for Artaud, this anarchic cacophony is the result of a theatre that is unplanned, unscripted and therefore entirely unpredictable. It enacts the 'discovery of an active language, active and anarchic.'[62]

That the Black Mountain event was a key moment in the development of Cage's theories of indeterminacy – as they were later articulated in the 1959 composition *Indeterminacy* and a text of the same name – is not disputed. His ideas on the subject are most explicitly outlined in the lecture 'Indeterminacy,' printed in his book *Silence*.[63] Although it does not allude to the 1952 event directly, the text recalls it in several places. Cage asserts, for example, that '[the performers] must at least be disposed separately around the audience, if not, by approaching their disposition in the most radically realistic sense, actually disposed within the audience itself.'[64] But Cage's rhetoric is also distinctly informed by that of Artaud's two 'Theatre of Cruelty' manifestoes; 'Indeterminacy' might be seen to act as an answer to the challenge posed by Artaud in the second chapter of *The Theater and Its Double*: 'why not conceive of a play composed directly on the stage, realized on the stage?'[65] Cage's text primarily stresses the point of performance, rather than that of composition, as the location of indeterminacy; he thus draws a distinction between music that is indeterminate in performance and that which incorporates chance at the point of its composition (such as Cage's own *Music of Changes*), but whose performers are instructed by a determinate notation that constricts and directs structure, method, form and materials at the point of performance.[66] The distinction is an important one, for while Cage's experiments with chance composition ally him firmly with those of his friend Marcel Duchamp (one might look to Duchamp's *Large Glass* or *Three Standard Stoppages* for comparison), the mode of indeterminacy in performance emerges from an engagement with Artaud.

Life in the shadows

In one of the most decisive analyses of the work of Cage's circle, written in 1977, Moira Roth outlines what she terms an 'Aesthetic of Indifference,' according to which the work of Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns might be seen to function in response to a specific set of cultural inscriptions that were engendered by the political landscape of the Cold War.[67] In an era dominated by cacophonous hysteria, Roth identifies art 'characterized by tones of neutrality, passivity, irony and, often, negation.'[68] Positing 'cool' art in opposition to 'hot' politics, and the silence of ironic indifference to the noise of moral indignation, Roth's account is informed by an underlying binary structure that, as we shall see, does not sit well with Cage's own position. Writing in response to Roth's essay several decades later, Jonathan D. Katz revised her term to read the *White Paintings* as a radical articulation of queer identity. He proposes 'a politics of negation, wherein negation functions as an active resistance to hegemonic constructions of meaning as natural or inherent in the work.'[69] It is a form of queer articulation that does not involve speaking at all, a radical silence on the part of artists who, as Katz has consistently asserted, 'remade their position as silent subjects under a homophobic culture.'[70] Thus silence is refigured not as complicity but resistance, as 'a seduction towards opposition, rather than as a declaration of oppositional terms.'[71] Katz takes his lead from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's deconstruction of the 'epistemology of the closet,' in which she proposes closetedness as a performative state initiated and maintained by silence.[72] Though Katz recognises a note of essentialism in Roth's dandified Duchamp, there is at the heart of his reading, as in Roth's, a Duchampian absenting, or excusing, of content, and the play of the oxymoron:

> In unexpressive expressionism, silent music, and *White Paintings*, Johns, Cage, and Rauschenberg, respectively, made a statement of nonstatement. In their hands nothingness, emptiness, and silence grew articulate.[73]

However, the vision of the *White Paintings* suspended above the proceedings in the Black Mountain College dining hall offers an alternative framing – that of the Artaudian cacophony, a plethora of voices that are rendered incomprehensible through their drowning each other out. The 'Juilliard Lecture' that most likely constituted Cage's own contribution offers a clue to the broader scope of his interests at the time of planning the event, though we must approach it conscious of the paradox inherent in singling out one voice from the multitude. As might be expected from a declaration of artistic intent made in the same year as Cage's *4'33"*, the lecture presents a radical fusion of the notions of sound and silence. But it also makes explicit Cage's rejection of the sound/silence binary, expounding instead a symbiotic relationship that implies for those white spaces on the page not emptiness, but a potential plenitude of sound: 'not one sound fears the silence that ex-tinguishes it. And no silence exists that is not pregnant with sound.'[74] Thus, just as Cage's anthology *Silence* is a rich mixture of literary styles, subject matter and typographical formats, *4'33"*, the so-called "'silent piece' is anything but. It emerges not as the 'empty' gesture of political paralysis that Roth and Katz claim, but as the embodiment of a sense of plenitude, immediacy and unrepeatability that is less Duchampian than it is an Artaudian 'space stocked with silence.'[75] In this respect, my reading is closer to that of Calvin Tomkins and, later, Branden Joseph, though neither have linked Cage's writing on the subject to that of Antonin Artaud.

With an Artaudian context in mind, we might return to the full text of the statement that Cage issued on the occasion of Rauschenberg's 1953 exhibition at the Stable Gallery:

> No subject
> No image
> No taste
> No object
> No beauty
> No message
> No talent
> No technique (no why)
> No idea
> No intention
> No art
> No feeling
> No black
> No white (no *and*)
>
> I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows.[76]

It becomes possible to read Cage's text as an extrapolation of the exclamation that titles Artaud's sixth chapter: 'No More Masterpieces!' In Cage's text, the iconoclastic denial of the conventions of mimetic visual representation are equated with the reliance on an originary authorial voice, with the production of 'feeling,' and with the delineation of black and white (Cage's visual equivalent of sound and silence). The trajectory of Cage's statement on Rauschenberg's paintings follows that of Artaud's text, which, alongside the two 'Theater of Cruelty' manifestoes, provides one the most succinct declarations of his iconoclastic position. Artaud's polemic, like Cage's statement, consists of a series of denouncements: of the elitist irrelevance of the artworks of the past (Cage's 'no subject / no image … no art'); of the concept of taste ('no taste … no beauty'); of 'purely descriptive and narrative theater – storytelling psychology' ('no message … no feeling');[77] of the veneration of the script and the ego of the author or artist ('no talent … no idea / no intention'); and of the strict delineation between art and life as binary terms (a distinction that is contained at least in implication in Cage's penultimate line, 'no black / no white'). In place of the stifling structures of artistic and linguistic conventions, Cage sets 'the action of shadows,' by which the *White Paintings* are 'not destroyed.' It is a manoeuvre that parallels Artaud's:

> Our petrified idea of the theater is connected with our petrified idea of a culture without shadows, where, no matter which way it turns, our mind (esprit) encounters only emptiness, though the space is full. But the true theater, because it moves and makes use of living instruments, continues to stir up shadows where life has never ceased to grope its way. The actor does not make the same gesture twice, but he makes gestures, he moves …[78]

The passage reiterates the vitality of the proposed model through a series of key antonyms: full as opposed to empty; moving as opposed to petrified; and the repetition of 'living' and 'life.' The shadow is an ephemeral and constantly changing manifestation of Artaud's double, directly connected to real life, and thus operating outside of the limits of a single or fixed mode of representation.

Denis Hollier has noted the importance of this state of unfixedness to the surrealist project more generally. In his analysis of surrealist paintings and writing, the iconic nature of the cast shadow places it in opposition to the fictional character, whose artificiality is articulated in the inability to cast a shadow.[79] The shadow indicates the presence of real things, but its fleeting existence, subjected to constant flux, means that it is 'less the representation of an object than the effect of an event.'[80] Unfixed and unfixable, it is 'a sign that doesn't survive,' and is therefore bereft of exchange-value.[81] For Hollier, these semiological properties of the shadow rendered it a crucial motif in Surrealist writing, one that dispensed with the mimetic representation of the novel (filled with characters incapable of casting shadows), and allowed the possibility of autobiographical modes of writing such as that found in André Breton's *Nadja*. Hollier stresses the role of the unknown destination in Surrealist narrative, in which primacy is given to the index over the icon. He draws primarily on the example of Breton and the Surrealist painters, though the scenario that he constructs is also typically Artaudian. In *The Theater and Its Double*, too, the motif of the shadow offers the means to escape the artificial signs of mimetic representation. It is for Artaud, as for Breton, both the method by which the impermeability of the novel is disrupted, and also the result of that rupture. Artaud's result is arguably more extreme than Breton's; for while, according to Hollier, the surrealists' efforts to inscribe the shadow into the body of writing resulted in the mode of autobiographical writing, Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' enacts the destruction of the written word altogether, at the hands of the shadow's indexical link to the real and its inherent quality of constant change. The theatrical performance is the arena in which this destruction is enacted, and it is in this arena that we witness Cage's framing of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*. In his inclusion of the paintings in the untitled performance at Black Mountain College, there emerges the repeated reinscription of the shadow, a process that enacts a continuous cycle of violent destruction and re-creation.

'Hallelujah!' Cage exclaims in his text 'On Robert Rauschenberg,' 'the blind can see again! Blind to what he has seen so that seeing this time is as though first seeing.'[82] The state of blindness that is shed in front of Rauschenberg's white canvasses is equivalent to Artaud's 'petrified idea of a culture without shadows.' It is the shadows that inhabit the paintings and Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty' alike that repeatedly enable 'seeing … as though first seeing.' Just as the conjuring of shadows represents for Artaud the defeat of the 'petrified' state of Occidental theatre, so for Cage it articulates an abandonment of the established European conventions of music, counterpoint, harmony and polyphony, according to which voices might be written to complement and develop each other. These stale forms of representation are the state of 'blindness' that must be thrown off. In *For the Birds*, Cage draws out the specific political implications of this strategy of composition: 'noises escape power, that is, the laws of counterpoint and harmony … today, we must identify ourselves with noises instead, and not seek laws for the noises.'[83] It is a sentiment that is politically anarchic and deeply revolutionary, and that, though made in 1976, resonates with the radical Artaudian project embarked upon at Black Mountain College in 1952. If we are to accept Artaudian cacophony as an important trope in this early reception of the *White Paintings*, we might interpret the shadow as a manifestation of his radical theatre of non-focus and non-hierarchy, a theatre, that is, that 'escapes power.' It promises a world of blurred distinctions, one in which nothing is predictable and anything is permissible. Artaud's target is the 'petrified idea of a culture without shadows,' defined (in terms that anticipate Cage's declaration in the 'Juilliard Lecture') as that place 'where, no matter which way it turns, our mind … encounters only emptiness, though the space is full.'[84] He continues:

> For theater, as for culture, it remains a question of naming and directing shadows: and the theater, not confined to a fixed language and form, not only destroys false shadows but prepares the way for a new generation of shadows, around which assembles the true spectacle of life.[85]

It is this 'new generation of shadows' that we find at work in the untitled event of 1952, in Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* and in the famous 'silent piece' that followed them. The shadows that lurk in the wings, ready to flicker playfully across the surface of the *White Paintings*, inhabit the same place as those sounds primed to echo through Cage's four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. By reading the *White Paintings* in terms of Artaud, then, we might begin to refigure Katz's 'performative silence' or 'politics of negation' into a performative politics of cacophony. Such a strategy, rooted in Artaud's radical theatrical model, harnesses the modes of contingency, improvisation and spatial radicality. It is motivated by the necessity of escaping the language of mastery, whether the regulated compositional techniques of harmony, the traditional boundaries of the proscenium stage, or the limits inscribed on the social body. This last entails the reclamation of the selfhood forbidden by a (hetero)normative script, a manoeuvre that Katz draws out in his reading of Cage in queer terms. Returning to Cage's Stable Gallery statement on the *White Paintings*, it is the final phrase that arouses the greatest interest in this context: Cage's assertion 'no *and*' functions as a denial of the binary structure the divides the world up into two separate parts, parts that, through the analogy of black and white, implicitly take on the roles of Self and Other, normative and non-normative. In their place he exhorts acceptance of a state of sameness through the denial of the act of conjoining that would imply an original state of division. In Cage's refashioning of Artaud, then, we find the potential to escape from a rigid subjectivity through the strategy of indeterminacy and the ambiguity of the unrepeatable shadow. The Artaudian double is made queer by virtue of its rejection of the kinds of binary definitions that shored up social conservatism during the post-war period. Subjugation to the play's script becomes metonymic for the constraints to which the homosexual body was subjected by a society that outlawed it. Lines and stage directions, intended to keep the actor in his place (on stage and within a psychological narrative framework), become analogous to so many linguistic and legislative lassoes.

For Artaud, as for Cage and those others at Black Mountain College, following the script, and thus remaining in the place designated to you, is not necessarily a good thing. The multiple points of focus occupied by the protagonists of the 1952 theatre event, and by the shadows that infinitely reconfigure the *White Paintings*, deny the possibility that there is a correct place. In doing so, they enact just that 'refusal of the limitations of the extant catechisms of identity' that Katz has argued as a condition of queerness.[86] Instead, they activate the peripheral spaces (those behind, amongst and above the Black Mountain audience, and those outside the perimeter of the canvas, where shadows lay in wait). These are spaces that are non-hierarchical, off-centre, queer. Thus the *White Paintings*' occupation of peripheral, provisional and non-focused sites might be read in terms that, in true Artaudian spirit, extend beyond the theatre – or dining hall, or New York gallery – to a space that, informed by an understanding of queer identity, lies beyond the place of normativity. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis, the categories of homosexual / heterosexual articulate polarised positions that masquerade as symmetrical, though in fact carry within them the subordination of the former to the latter, and the dependence of that condition of subordination for the latter's existence.[87] These are categories, labels, roles, that depend ultimately on the command of logos, the commanding word that structures the dominating realm of the Symbolic. As Katz points out, it is this that Cage seeks to escape: 'Now replaced by a policy of noninterference, meaning was for Cage freed from any dependence on such a logos, for it was logos, after all, that had marked him as disturbed, marginal, and unworthy in the first place.’[88] It is just this logos, too, that results in Artaud’s ‘petrified idea of culture without shadows,’ and it is freedom from logos that Artaud’s shadows promise.

A queer reading of Cage’s encounter with Artaud is situated, of course, in a specific historical moment, one in which identity is put under threat on several fronts. Cage’s engagement with the works of the French author was not uninformed by Artaud’s own self-declared position as persecuted and silenced. Though the letters from Rodez, which crystallise this marginal position, would not be published until over a decade later, the bare facts of Artaud’s incarceration in the asylum there, and the electro-shock treatment to which he was submitted, were repeated by those who facilitated his early reception in the United States.[89] It is worth recalling Cage’s friendship with Souvtchinsky, an associate of Artaud’s, and with others in Paris who would have been familiar with his biography. In addition to this, Artaud’s resolute adoption of a constantly shifting position outside of conventional signification places him apart from the more codified heterosexual model of mainstream (Bretonian) surrealism. ‘Surrealism relates to therapy,’ Cage stated, and his rejection of the latter compromised the usefulness of the former.[90] If we are to accept Sedgwick’s formulation of the closet, then the fact that Artaud was not an overtly homosexual source made him, in all probability, all the more useful in the atmosphere of hysterical right-wing politics that Roth highlights as restrictive and Katz specifies as homophobic. For Richards, ‘[e]very person is involved in a DOUBLE life. … It makes us actors in a cosmic drama. It gives us, as Artaud put it, a destiny to measure ourselves against.’[91] This is a somewhat enigmatic statement that is partly informed by Richards’ interest in alchemy; but it speaks, too, to a certain kind of identity politics that is relevant here: the ‘double life’ of the closet refigured as a life energised by the Artaudian double. Katz concludes his 1998 analysis of the queer potential of ‘performative silence’ with a sentiment that takes on a new relevance in the context of this queering of Artaud: ‘the actor who doesn’t speak their lines,’ Katz writes, ‘offers a very particular kind of eloquence, full of possibility and promise, the challenge and hope of an entirely different script.’[92] A queer Artaud offers an even bolder promise: the challenge and hope of no script at all.

It is in this context that the true nature of Artaud’s model of ‘cruelty,’ so often misunderstood in terms of mere bloodlust, is crucial. Far from a sadistic proposition, in fact, it is rather one about compulsion and commitment, a matter of life and death. The Grove Press edition of *The Theater and Its Double* includes a letter that elaborates the term: ‘I employ the word ‘cruelty,’ Artaud writes, ‘in the sense of an appetite for life, a cosmic rigor and implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of a living whirlwind that devours the darkness, in the sense of that pain apart from whose ineluctable necessity life could not continue.’[93] The pain of Artaudian ‘cruelty; is not one inflicted on others, but one that is situated within the self flung headlong against the world. Richards reiterated this in a text of 1963: 'Our lives are at stake. It is not a matter of aesthetics but of metaphysical forces, of life forces, of renewal.'[94] Rachel Rosenthal, who would become close friends with Cage, Rauschenberg and Richards later in the 1950s is also adamant on this point. She defines Artaudian cruelty as that situation,

> when you do something with such dedication that you are caught up in its wheels, and just have to do it and it's very difficult and yet you have that sense of responsibility to the art; this is the kind of cruelty he was talking about.[95]

Artaud's insistence on theatre as a vital and revolutionary force directly connected to life was crucial to his reception even in its first stages.

The untitled event at Black Mountain College concluded in a quiet and sociable kind of revolution: with coffee, poured into cups that had been placed on the seats from the start (and some of which were by this point filled with cigarette butts and trash). Neatly fusing the café culture of the Parisian Left Bank and the Zen ritual of the Japanese tea ceremony, the imbibing of coffee speaks of collective consciousness and conversation, a final insistence on audience participation, quiet but stubborn. It is surely not quite what Artaud envisaged when he wrote of the theatre as plague, a 'contagious delirium,' that affects its audience 'with the force of an epidemic.'[96] Nevertheless, in Artaud's language in this passage of *The Theater and Its Double*, we find some of 'that same insistence' that Cage did. It is what Artaud termed 'this total exorcism which presses and impels the soul to its utmost.'[97] Artaud's explication of the theatre as plague contains much that chimes with Cage's Zen articulation of the constant music of the world, and with the shadows that exist only on the surface of the *White Paintings*:

> The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures; the theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go: like the plague it reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in nature.[98]

What developed at Black Mountain, and beyond, may be more a Cagean case of sudden sneezing than an Artaudian plague. But it was no less seismic for that.

Conclusion

'When I wish as now to tell of critical incidents, persons, and events that have influenced my life and work,' John Cage mused in 1989, 'the true answer is all of the incidents were critical, all of the people influenced me, everything that happened and that is still happening influences me.'[99] The sources that he cites are manifestly multifarious. In a letter to the journal *Musical America* in 1951 he reveals a typically eclectic range of allusions. Artaud's name appears alongside those of Buddha, Voltaire, Eckhardt, Blake, Socrates, W. H. Blythe, Joyce, and his wife Xenia.[100] The broad array of sources – some of which are attributed to single words or phrases that seem parodically brief – creates a cacophony of allusion. It at once points to the futility of quoting and produces a new collaborative voice, a collection of unlikely literary bedfellows that bestows a new identity on each. Elsewhere, Cage expresses an irreverent attitude to the literature of the past: 'There are oodles of people who are going to think of the past as a museum and be faithful to it, but that's not my attitude. Now as material it can be put together with other things. They could be things that don't connect with art as we conventionally understand it.'[101] Cage's citation of Artaud is a case in point: the text is dehistoricised, uprooted from its French or surrealist connection, mingled, even allied, with Zen Buddhism. It represents nothing beyond what is on the page, torn from the symbolic implications of historical significance. The dynamic of Cage's encounter with Artaud is one other than simple repetition, and so avoids the paradox of adhering to an exclusively Artaudian script. It is clear that in this context *The Theater and Its Double* went far beyond the category of practical theatrical manual, a set of written staging instructions to be carried out, and that Artaud embodied for Cage far more than the 'apolitical pre-Rodez man of theater' that Douglas Kahn asserts.[102] Instead, as I have demonstrated, Cage's encounter with Artaud's text was one that articulated a complex subjective position that was cruel in the Artaudian sense, but that might also be understood according to the terms offered by queer theory. This encounter, in turn, structured the early framing of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* at Black Mountain College in 1952.

Rauschenberg issued his own statement on the occasion of his Stable Gallery exhibition in 1953, one that is less often cited than Cage's, but is just as revealing. 'My black paintings and my white paintings,' he declared, 'are either too full or too empty to be thought – thereby they remain visual experiences. These pictures are not Art.'[103] If they are neither conceptual (thought), nor canonified iconography (Art with an upper case 'A'), then what, the question is begged, are they? Cage's early framing of the *White Paintings* as part of a radical Artaudian performance offers us one possible answer: the *White Paintings* are cruel. They 'continue to stir up shadows where life has never ceased to grope its way:' and in this respect, they are theatre.[104]

This article, drawn from my PhD thesis 'After Artaud: Art in America, 1949-1965,' was written with the generous support of a doctoral grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and a Wallis Annenberg Research Grant from the University of Southern California. A Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Getty Research Institute aided its completion. I would like to

---

thank the conveners of the Association of Art Historians annual conference 2009 session ‘Surrealism and Non-Normative Sexualities,’ Professor Dawn Ades, Dr Jonathan D. Katz, and Professor David Lomas; and Dr James Boaden for the advice and encouragement he has offered.

[1] John Ashbery, ‘Litany,’ in *As We Know: Poems*, New York, Viking Press, 1979, 35.

[2] Interview with Carroll Williams, 47, box 15, Martin Duberman collection, PC.1678, North Carolina State Archives [hereafter MD, NCSA].

[3] Hubert Crehan, ‘Raw Duck,’ in *Art Digest*, 15 September 1953, 25.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] See respectively Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*, New York, Penguin Books, 1980, 72: Vincent Katz, ‘A Genteel Iconoclasm,’ in *TATE etc.*, No. 8, Autumn 2006, 39: Branden W. Joseph, ‘White on White,’ in *Critical Enquiry*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Autumn 2000, pp. 90-121, reprinted in Branden Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, MA and London, The MIT Press, 2003, 25-71.

[6] According to Vincent Katz, they have ‘nothing of the humour of the Surrealists.’ See Katz, ‘A Genteel Iconoclasm,’ 39.

[7] John Cage, ‘Robert Rauschenberg,’ in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, Documentary Monographs in Modern Art, London, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1974, 111-12.

[8] John Cage, ‘On Robert Rauschenberg, artist, and his work’ [1961], in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, New York and London, Marion Boyars, 1973, 102. The article was first published in *Metro* in Milan in May 1961.

[9] Joseph, *Random Order*, esp. chapter 1: ‘White On White,’ 24-71.

[10] Cage ‘Forward,’ in *Silence*, x.

[11] Mariellen R. Sanderford, ed., *Happenings and Other Acts*, New York and London, Routledge, 1995, 51-71.

[12] William Fetterman, *John Cage’s Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances*, New York and London, Routledge, 1995, 103.

[13] Fetterman, *John Cage’s Theatre Pieces*, 97ff.

[14] The appointment, in 1949, of Hazel Larsen Archer as the first full-time teacher of photography crystallised the strength of the discipline at Black Mountain College, and this continued in the early 1950s Summer Sessions. See Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press, 1987, 188, 217.

[15] See, respectively, Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1991, 76: Gerald Weales, *The Jumping-Off Place: American Drama in the 1960s*, London, Macmillan, 1969, 266: Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theater of Mixed Means: An Introduction to Happenings, Kinetic Environments and Other Mixed-Means Presentations* [1968], New York, RK Editions, 1980.

---

[16] Transcript of phone interview with John Cage, 26 April 1969, 15, box 13, MD, NCSA.

[17] Katz's writing on Cage, Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns has spanned several decades and numerous publications. See, in particular, Jonathan D. Katz, 'Performative Silence and the Politics of Passivity,' in Henry Rogers and David Burrows, eds. *Making a Scene*, Birmingham, Birmingham University Press, 1999, 97-103; Jonathan D. Katz, 'John Cage's Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse,' in David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch, eds. *Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry + Art*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2001, 41-61.

[18] John Cage, 'Forerunners of Modern Music,' in *The Tiger's Eye*, Vol. 1, No. 7, March 1949, 52-56; cited in the magazine's Table of Contents, 59. The article is reprinted in *Silence*, 62-66.

[19] See *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Directing Issue, June 1972, 90-145.

[20] *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, collected, edited and introduced by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, with Francoise Daroine, Hans Oesch and Robert Piencikowski, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

[21] Letter from John Cage to Pierre Boulez, dated 18 December 1950, in *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, 78.

[22] Pierre Boulez, 'Propositions,' in *Polyphonie*, No. 2, 1948, 65-72. For a discussion of the impact of Artaud on the work of Pierre Boulez, see Peter F. Stacey, *Boulez and the Modern Concept*, Aldershot, Scholar Press, 1987, 22-25.

[23] Letter from John Cage to Pierre Boulez, dated 18 December 1950, in *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, 78.

[24] Letter from John Cage to Pierre Boulez, dated 22 May 1951, in *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, 96.

[25] Letter from M.C. Richards to her father and brother, 2 April 1949, box 3, folder 1, Mary Caroline Richards papers, 1928-1994, Getty Research Intitute, Research Library, Accession no. 960036 (hereafter MCR, GRI).

[26] Letter from M.C. Richards to James Herlihy, 29 January 1949, box 3, folder 1, MCR, GRI.

[27] Jean-Louis Barrault, *Reflections on the Theatre*, London, Salisbury Square, 1951, 47-49.

[28] Barrault, *Reflections on the Theatre*, 50.

[29] M.C. Richards, 'For Ararat,' box 31, folder 3, MCR, GRI.

[30] Letter from David Tudor to M.C. Richards, postmarked 13 November 1951, box 26, folder 1, MCR, GRI.

[31] Letter from M.C. Richards to Howard Adams, 18 June, 1966, box 3, folder 7, MCR, GRI.

[32] Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2005, 59. Elsewhere in the issue, Joanna Pawlik 'Artaud in performance:

---

dissident surrealism and the postwar American literary avant-garde,' discusses other early appearances of Artaud's work in English translation, and the impact of his Theatre of Cruelty on the performance poetry of writers associated with the Beat movement and the San Francisco Renaissance. Many of her ideas are extremely pertinent to this article.

[33] Mary Emma Harris telephone conversation with Mary Caroline Richards, 3 June 1981; M.C. Richards, 'For Ararat,' box 31, folder 3, MCR, GRI.

[34] Letter from Cid Corman to Charles Olson, Dorchester MA, September 28, 1953, in Charles Olson and Cid Corman, *Complete Correspondence 1950 - 1964*, ed. George Evans, Vol. II, Orono, Maine, National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1991, 95.

[35] *Origin*, No. 11, Autumn 1953, 131, 133, 145-192, 193-94.

[36] M.C. Richards, Curriculum Vitae, box 64, folder 1, MCR, GRI.

[37] Barrault, *Reflections on the Theatre*, 62-63.

[38] 'B.M.C. prospectus for Spring Semester, Feb, 11 – June 7, 1952,' cited in *Black Mountain College. Experiment in Art*, ed. Vincent Katz, Cambridge MA and London, MIT Press, 2002, 202. Though the document is unsigned, Katz assesses on the basis of the writing style, layout and typography of the original that the text's author was Charles Olson.

[39] Mary Caroline Richards, Notes on Black Mountain College, MCR, GRI.

[40] 'B.M.C. prospectus for Spring Semester, Feb, 11 – June 7, 1952,' cited in Vincent Katz, ed. *Black Mountain College*, 202.

[41] Mark Hedden, 'Notes on Theater at Black Mountain College (1948-1952),' in *Form*, No. 9, April 1969, 18.

[42] See Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, 37-40.

[43] The Light Sound Movement (LSM) Workshop was led by Warren 'Pete' and Betty Jennerjahn, together with student Mark Hedden, in the 1949-50 school year. It drew on Bauhaus and Dada ideas in its envisioning of the total synchronisation of dance, sound, costumes and light projection.

[44] See John Cage, 'Defense of Satue,' in *John Cage*, 80.

[45] See Vincent Katz (ed.), *Black Mountain College*, 187, for a discussion of the LSM workshops as a link between the early theatrical experiments of Shawinsky and Evarts, and Cage's 1952 event.

[46] Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: an Exploration in Community*, London, Wildwood House, 1972, 324: Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theater of Mixed Means. An Introduction to Happenings, Kinetic Environments and Other Mixed-Means Presentations* [1968], New York, RK Editions, 1980, xiii.

[47] Transcript of interview with Karen Karnes, 16, box 32, North Carolina Museum of Art, Black Mountain College Research Project, Research Files, 61.12.2, North Carolina State Archives [hereafter BMCRP, NCSA].

---

[48] Hedden, ‘Notes on Theater at Black Mountain College,’ 18.

[49] Kostelanetz, *The Theater of Mixed Means*.

[50] John Cage, cited in Vincent Katz, ed. *Black Mountain College*, 138.

[51] Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, ‘An Interview with John Cage,’ in Mariellen R. Sandford, ed. *Happenings and Other Acts*, London and New York, Routledge, 52. Emphasis in original.

[52] Richards’ attribution of the suspended paintings to Franz Kline is unique among recollections of the event.

[53] This statement was included in the programme notes for early performances of the *Sonata*. See Joan Peyser, *Boulez: Composer, Conductor, Enigma*, London, Cassell, 1976.

[54] Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, New York, Grove Press, 1958, 89. My emphasis.

[55] Karen Karnes, interviewed by Melody Kane-Lewis, 21 July 1992, for Kane, Richards and Melody Lewis-Kane (dir.), *M. C. Richards: The Fire Within*, 2006.

[56] Transcript of interview with Karen Karnes, 16, box 32, BMCRP, NCSA.

[57] Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 81.

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] *Ibid.*, 86-87.

[60] Cage, ‘Juilliard Lecture’ [1952], 100. Quoted in *Silence*, 44.

[61] Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 46.

[62] *Ibid.*, 41.

[63] John Cage, ‘Indeterminacy,’ in *Silence*, 35.

[64] *Ibid.*, 40.

[65] Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 41.

[66] See Austin Clarkson, ‘Stefan Wolpe and Abstract Expressionism,’ in Steven Johnson, ed. *The New York Schools of Music and Visual Arts,* New York and London, Routledge, 2002, 96, for a discussion of Cage’s mis-interpretation in this text of Morton Feldman’s graphic scores as ‘indeterminate.’

[67] Moira Roth, ‘The Aesthetic of Indifference,’ *Difference/Indifference. Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, eds. Moira Roth and Jonathan D. Katz, Amsterdam, G+B Arts International, 1998, 33-47. All future references will be to this edition. The essay was originally published in *Artforum*, Vol. 16, No. 3, November 1977, 46-53.

---

[68] Roth, ‘The Aesthetic of Indifference,’ 35.

[69] Jonathan D. Katz, ‘Identification,’ in Moira Roth and Jonathan D. Katz, *Difference/Indifference,* 63.

[70] Jonathan D. Katz, ‘Performative Silence and the Politics of Passivity,’ in *Making a Scene*, eds. Henry Rogers and David Burrows, Birmingham, Birmingham University Press, 1999, 99. Katz reiterates this point in ‘John Cage’s Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse,’ in *Writings Through John Cage’s Music, Poetry + Art*, eds. David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2001, 55ff.

[71] Katz, ‘Performative Silence and the Politics of Passivity,’ 101.

[72] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1990, 3.

[73] Katz, ‘Identification,’ 62.

[74] Cage, ‘Juilliard Lecture’ [1952], 98.

[75] Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 86.

[76] John Cage, ‘Robert Rauschenberg,’ 111-12.

[77] *Ibid.*, 76.

[78] *Ibid*.,12.

[79] Denis Hollier, ‘Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don’t Cast Shadows,’ *October*, Vol. 69, Summer 1994, 115.

[80] *Ibid*.

[81] *Ibid.*, 114.

[82] Cage, ‘On Robert Rauschenberg,’ 102.

[83] John Cage, *For the Birds: John Cage in Conversation with Daniel Charles*, Boston, Marion Boyars, 1981, 236.

[84] Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 12.

[85] *Ibid.*

[86] Katz, ‘Performative Silence and the Politics of Passivity,’ 99.

[87] Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, 9-10.

[88] Katz, ‘John Cage’s Queer Silence,’ 52.

---

[89] The biographical note in *Black Mountain Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 1954, 40, is typical in both its content and its brevity: ‘Antonin Artaud died recently, shortly after his release from a French insane asylum.’

[90] John Cage and Allan Gillmor, ‘Interview with John Cage’ [1973], in *Contact*, Vol. 14, Autumn 1976; John Cage interview by Paul Cummings, 2 May 1974, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. At the time of writing, new avenues are being opened up in the field of queer Surrealism, led by the AHRC-funded research project ‘Surrealism and Non-Normative Sexualities,’ at the AHRC Centre for Study of Surrealism and Its Legacies at the University of Manchester.

[91] M.C. Richards, ‘Antonin Artaud: *The Theater and Its Double,*’ manuscript for a lecture delivered at the Living Theater, New York, 1959, 13, box 30, folder 3, MCR, GRI.

[92] Katz, ‘Performative Silence and the Politics of Passivity,’ 103.

[93] Antonin Artaud, letter to J.P., 14 November 1942, trans. M.C. Richards, *The Theater and Its Double*, 103. Richards would quote this passage in a lecture on Artaud she delivered at the Living Theatre in New York in 1960.

[94] M.C. Richards, untitled statement on Artaud, New York, June 1963, box 30, folder 3, MCR, GRI.

[95] Interview with Rachel Rosenthal, conducted by the author, 26 February 2009, Culver City, Los Angeles.

[96] Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 26-27.

[97] *Ibid.*, 27.

[98] *Ibid.*

[99] John Cage, ‘An Autobiographical Statement,’ *Southwest Review*, Vol. 76, No. 1, Winter 1991, 59. The statement was originally written for the Inamori Foundation and delivered in Kyoto as a commemorative lecture in response to Cage’s receipt of the Kyoto Prize in November 1989. Cage delivered the talk again at Southern Methodist University on 17 April 1990, as part of the year-long celebration of the Algur H. Meadows award for excellence in the arts given to Robert Rauschenberg.

[100] Carbon copy of a letter from John Cage to the editor of *Musical America* in response to a letter from Mr. Shulsky, box 52, folder 3, David Tudor papers, 1884-1998 (bulk 1940-1996), Getty Research Institute, Research Library, accession no. 980039.

[101] Kirby and Schechner, ‘An Interview with John Cage,’ 54.

[102] Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat*: *A History of Sound in the Arts*, Cambridge, MA and London, MIT Press, 2001, 331.

[103] Robert Rauschenberg cited in Hubert Crehan, ‘Raw Duck,’ 25.

[104] Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 12.

Lucy Bradnock completed her PhD, ‘After Artaud: Art in America, 1949-1965’ at the University of Essex in 2010, following a BA and MA at the Courtauld Institute of Art. She currently holds a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Getty Research Institute, where her research is carried out under the auspices of the Getty project ‘Pacific Standard Time: Art in Los Angeles, 1945-80.’