

Artaud's Metamorphosis: From Hieroglyphs to Bodies without Organs

Introduction: Metabolism and Immortality

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To title this endeavor *Artaud's Metamorphosis: From Hieroglyphs to Bodies without organs* is already to make bold and defined what often remains evanescent in the work of Antonin Artaud. This is the first risk in a project that seeks to establish a more complete understanding and coherence for Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) one of the most seminal and visionary mid-20th century artists, whose mental and neurological disturbance, hard drug-addiction, and confinement for nine years in French asylums have made him a bona fide candidate for the *poète maudite* myth. Despite this difficulty in functioning – the sympathetic Dr. Achille Delmas told Artaud at the end of his life at Ivry-sur-Seine “You need a gramme of heroin every day”¹ – it is the sheer profusion and complexity of Artaud’s work that often makes it a challenge to decipher. This can make some judgments on Artaud seem odd, such as Michel Foucault’s well-known conclusion in *Madness and Civilization* that Artaud’s “madness is precisely the *absence of the work of art*, the reiterated presence of that absence.”² One of the threads of remarkable consistency in Artaud is his hostility to the notion of and institution of ‘art,’ to be sure, yet his works were prodigious, in innovation not just quantity.

This venture is based on such consistency, while arguing that there is a transformation in Artaud, from his early works (from 1923-4 the time of his published “Correspondence with Jacques Rivière” to his visit to the Tarahumara Indians in Mexico in 1936) to the Artaud of 1946-8 who emerged from the asylums to return to Paris. My

¹ Quoted from a conversation with Artaud in Jacques Prevel. *En Compagnie d'Antonin Artaud*. Paris: Flammarion, 1974. p. 139. Biographer Stephen Barber has estimated that by the mid-1930's Artaud was taking forty grammes of opium once every sixty hours (generally in the form of laudanum), with a maximum dose of seventy grammes. See Stephen Barber. *Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs*. London: Faber & Faber, 1993. p. 78. For a brief comparison of Artaud’s drug-taking with the opium use of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas de Quincey, and Jean Cocteau, see Clayton Eshleman, “Introduction,” *Watchfiends and Rack Screams: Works from the Final Period by Antonin Artaud*. Ed. and trans. by Clayton Eshleman with Bernard Bador. Boston: Exact Change, 1995. n. 11. pp. 45-6.

² Michel Foucault. *Madness and Civilization*. Trans. Richard Howard. London/New York: Routledge, [1961] 2001. p. 272. Italics in original.

argument regarding this transformation is based on the key idea in Artaud's early works of the "hieroglyph" and the central role it plays in his famous theater manifestoes, and how it shifts and disappears, exploding in the drawings, writings, and sound works of the 'later' Artaud. Artaud evokes the importance of hieroglyphics most memorably in his essay on the Balinese dancers he saw in the L'Exposition coloniale de Paris in 1931, one of the primary inspirations for his concept of the Theater of cruelty: the Balinese dancers create an atmosphere of "fear and hallucination" through a "pure theater" based on "gestures – diagrams."³ The actors move as "animated hieroglyphs" that produce a sense of "*matter as revelation*."⁴ This world of moving matter is outlined by "all the intersections of their lines, with all the intersections of their perspectives in the air."⁵ So many themes that for Artaud are wrapped up in this hieroglyphic constellation are strongly adumbrated here – the eclipse of identity and words and discursive logic, the evocation of a vast tonality or music (emphasized from first to last in the Balinese essay). Artaud here writes of "ritual gestures" that impel a "primary Physics," for this superior dance that draws all before it has also a "mathematical meticulousness."⁶ Foreshadowing how in his later writing Artaud would combine multiple literary and polemic forms in a single letter, in this single essay Artaud elaborates all the different senses of a hieroglyph, in its original Greek sense of holy (hieros)/carving (glyph) as a kind of esoteric or original language, as pictograph or ideogram (Artaud's preference for languages like Chinese or Japanese ideogrammic script), or as phonogram (the emphasis on sound and voice and tonality that runs throughout Artaud's writings). If one thinks of the sense of the hieroglyph as an ideogram where the thing, the notion or idea of the thing, and the term for it are "a whole wedded by the mark of the 'character,'"⁷ Artaud plumbs this mark also as the gesture that cannot be encapsulated by discursive logic, that poses another more primal logic of its own. A hieroglyph, as Gilles Deleuze defines it, is the situation where "the essences are at once the thing to be translated and the translation itself, the sign and the meaning." Echoing Artaud, Deleuze continues, maintaining that "the hieroglyph is everywhere; its double symbol is the accident of the encounter and the necessity of thought: 'fortuitous and inevitable.'"⁸

³ Antonin Artaud, "Sur Le Théâtre Balinais," *Oeuvres complètes*. Vol. IV. Paris: Gallimard, 1964. p. 64. Selections from Artaud's complete works hereafter cited simply by volume, year, and page number. All translations from Artaud and other authors in French, unless indicated otherwise, are my own.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 65, 72. Italics in original.

⁵ Ibid. p. 65.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 72, 69.

⁷ Julia Kristeva. *Language, the Unknown*. Trans. Anne M. Menke. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, [1981]1989. p. 93.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze. *Proust and Signs*. Trans. Richard Howard. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1964] 2000. p. 102.

While it may be more digestible analytically to isolate features of Artaud's hieroglyphic conception – the double, the virtual, the cruelty of action and so on, and deal with them one section or chapter at a time – this would involve considerable violence to its source. Instead, this project winds around the different problematics of the movement of Artaud's hieroglyphics, moving from one element such as his glossolalia or the place of the graphic sign, and then returning to it later in another context or another light. This is an attempt to be more faithful to Artaud, who has his own extremely fluid coherence but is far from ever systematizing his development and metamorphoses. And while I often link and rely on a dialog of a distinct earlier and later Artaud to illuminate each other, there is a rough chronological focus to the chapters that first focus on the Tarahumara experience and its ramifications, and then to the transformation of Artaud in the asylums and final works in Paris. In fact, the Artaud of a certain point in Rodez and later 1945-8, raises another set of terms that come to the fore in my last three chapters – the prevalence of magic, the battle with evil, the “search for fecality,” the totem, and infinity, the form taken by the “body without organs.” These concerns that can be lifted from Artaud demonstrate that his invention of the "body without organs" has supplanted his earlier fascination with an hieroglyphically formed reality. Artaud's Mexican lectures in 1936 for instance, are eloquent in his description of a cosmos moved by ever-active sacred lines; with the construction of the “body without organs” at the end of his life, this apocalyptic creation has freed itself from even those tangible lineaments.

In the quintessential ‘early’ Artaud of “On the Balinese Theater,” the Balinese dancers evoke nothing less than the riddle of the universe, making of dance a primordial language that bypasses words. These notions had been building in Artaud for a time, who had already provided striking formulations of this hieroglyphic skein of signs or primordial reality in his writings on the paintings of André Masson, Picasso, and others in the 1920's.⁹ It had fueled his search for a Theater of cruelty that could re-ignite primitive ritual sources, and he had discovered in his research in 1933-4 for his biography of the mad 3rd century Roman sun king Heliogabalus various mystical and mythological foundations for it.¹⁰ These obsessions crystallize with a desperation and clarity that are all Artaud's own in his journey to Mexico in 1936 where his various addresses in Mexico City best evoke this ultimate reality. Looking forward all the while to what he calls his own crucifixion, Artaud's participation in Tarahumara Indian peyote rites in September, 1936 is such a crucial event in his life, that I will argue there is a pre- and post-Tarahumara Artaud. With the Tarahumaras Artaud finds a living Theater of cruelty whose rites are based on strange signs the peyote

⁹ See the section “Explaining ‘occult geometry’: Artaud's art criticism” in chapter II.

¹⁰ Artaud VII, 1967, pp. 7-113.

priests draw on the ground and in the air. A confirmation of some of his deepest intuitions, the rites (or at least Artaud's interpretation and experience of them) also initiate Artaud in a world of sorcery and apocalypse that reach a fever pitch during his trip to Ireland the following year. Returning to France in a strait-jacket in September, 1937, Artaud undergoes numerous changes and mutations in identity and subjectivization, but this universe of bewitchment, central to his famous essay on painter Vincent Van Gogh written in 1947,¹¹ remains a constant.

It is in the dynamics of this universe in which Artaud's conceptions of the hieroglyph changes. In Artaud's art writings, theater manifestoes, and Mexican lectures (ranging from the mid-20's to 1936) his call for a ritual theater is one of rites oriented around specific spatializations, a subordination of time to space typical, as I will show, of most tribal rituals.¹² A current shorthand example of this typical subordination is found in contemporary Aboriginal art, or "Western desert art."¹³ In the works of Geoffrey Bardon, Kathleen Petyarre, and Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, to take three examples, there are very complex senses of time, certainly, but what is overwhelming and what fills the painting is the different senses and becomings of space. The spiky lizard creature or "mountain-devil," the *arnkerrth* that inhabits most of the Western desert, is "not represented figuratively but conceptualized spatially. In Anmatyerr art all living creatures, including human beings, are depicted as predominantly spatial rather than psychological beings, interacting in natural and cultural landscapes that occupy space over time."¹⁴ These paintings' predominant emphasis on spatialization of phenomena place them within the millennial tradition of ritual art that Artaud seems to espouse in the 1930's only to overthrow later. The 'later' Artaud of the Rodez writings and afterwards, poses a choice, what he described in *To have done with the judgment of god* (1947-8) between the "infinite outside, [or] that of the infinitesimal inside."¹⁵ Artaud's work never ceases to be located on this borderline, but his invention of the "body without organs"(a body that has no 'interior') proposes to link to the infinite

¹¹ Artaud XIII, 1974, pp. 9-64.

¹² See the discussion of these anthropological and shamanic contexts in chapters II and III, which draws on accounts of the Tarahumara rites as well as works by Marcel Mauss, Victor Turner, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edmund Leach, Carlos Castaneda, José Gil, and others. This is extended into chapter IV that begins with a consideration of Artaud's spells, looks at the traditional notion of art as action, and then presents different aspects of Artaud's severe and creative manipulation of the figure of the cross in its contrast to perspectives offered by Jung, Maya Deren, and René Guénon.

¹³ See Elizabeth Grosz' arguments concerning this art in her *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. pp. 89-101.

¹⁴ Christine Nicholls and Ian North. Eds. *Kathleen Petyarre: Genius of Place*. Adelaide: Wakefield, 2001. p. 10.

¹⁵ Artaud XIII, 1974, p. 85.

outside. A series of considerations on time as a means of overcoming the hypostasisation of 'being' is the overwhelming concern of mainstream European philosophy, especially since the latter part of the 19th century, and I have seen no need to rehearse that history here.¹⁶ Contemporary complexity theory and sciences only reinforce this, with their discovery of the irreversibility of time.¹⁷ Yet Artaud's loosening of the element of time so prominent in his 1946-8 works has far more shamanistic overtones, an example of what I slowly delineate in chapters II, III, and IV as the opposition of sorcery (and its release of elements in a conflict of power) to religious rituals (where time is stuffed into space in the interest of tribal and cosmic harmony). It is part of Artaud's contemporaneity that already in 1927 he is writing how we can no longer believe in the image, his release of the element of time in his cinema theories forming one of the major fulcrums of Gilles Deleuze's later philosophy of film.¹⁸ Artaud typically presents these problems in such a manner that it is difficult to discuss their credibility (such as Artaud's particular notion of eternity), without crossing over with him, to participate in the double or triple worlds he planned to discover among the Tarahumaras.¹⁹

It is by broaching the transformation of the 'hieroglyph' as my subject that I can show the true radicality, the extremity, the singularity of the final Artaud. The Artaud who is released from Rodez asylum May, 1946 is one who so scorns any "representation" and even the ghost of representation in the idea of "virtuality"²⁰ that the notion of any hieroglyph at the centre of moving matter is also rejected. "I abject all signs," Artaud writes in 1947, "I create only machines of instant utility."²¹ Whereas Artaud's 1930's Theater of cruelty could be reconciled with primitive ritual and even Aristotelian catharsis or purging, what Artaud advocates after his release is still a Theater of cruelty or theater of blood,²² but one in which time is released into its own autonomy; his concern now is with infinity. Artaud's creations, such as the drawings, or his daily laboratory that is his voluminous *cahiers*, a group of 406 school exercise notebooks, are also animated beings that serve to

¹⁶ For a collection of texts, see Charles M. Sherover. Ed. *The Human Experience of Time: the Development of its Philosophic Meaning*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1975. For a sharp consideration of the issue of time in the 20th century era of modernism and the avant-garde, see Peter Osborne. *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*. London/New York: Verso, 1995.

¹⁷ See in particular Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers. *Order Out of Chaos*. New York: Bantam, 1984.

¹⁸ See the section "The revelation of how the 'hieroglyph' works in Artaud's film scenarios" in in chapter I.

¹⁹ As Artaud wrote to Jean Paulhan 23 April, 1936, in Artaud V, 1964, p. 276.

²⁰ Artaud XIII, 1974, p. 258.

²¹ Ibid. p. 273.

²² For a typical statement of this theater in which "something/will be won/*physically*," written within a month of his death, see *ibid.* pp. 146-7.

carry on his cosmic combat. They, as much as Artaud, are now a “body without organs” a war unto eternity. This “body without organs” is a creation of Artaud’s in the cauldron of a horrific psychiatric confinement,²³ simultaneously a defense of a shattered body and psyche and an offense against its torturers, at once a “virtual” body²⁴ and a violent infinite gesture that does away with any signs. It is a double body, predicated on the actual one but not touching it at any point. Through it Artaud intends to abolish interiority once and for all and forgo the limitations of the physical flesh. This is a process that one cannot ever be completely “done with,” and is part of Artaud’s wager with infinity. The “body without organs” is both a product of the Artaud who saw double and triple worlds in the Tarahumara rites, and his refutation of all mystical systems at the end of his life. This later Artaud rejects the “hieroglyphics and secret keyboard,”²⁵ and denounces all priests as flim-flam operators and conjurers, including the Tibetans and the Ciguri peyote priests among the Tarahumaras.²⁶ He is his own creation. The Artaud of the 1930’s was immersed in various forms of mysticism. The Artaud of 1946-8 ferociously denounces all these forms as an avoidance of pain and individuation. The “body without organs,” that will ultimately efface all traces of the hieroglyph, is typical of Artaud in its thinness of borders between a kind of genius and marked disturbance: born of a defense against the various demonic forces he saw as erotically experimenting with his body, the “body without organs” is a kind of recognition born from dementia or disturbance that also undeniably possesses an extraordinary poetry and insight into desire.²⁷ Its exploration of the potential infinity of the

²³ See chapter V “Hieroglyphics as Primitive Cure.”

²⁴ Deleuze defined the virtual as “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract,” a definition he borrowed from Proust. See Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. London/New York: Continuum [1968] 2002. p. 208. The virtual is far from the merely possible, but is fully real insofar as it is virtual, part of immanent active forms rather than a possibility based on or reliant upon a transcendent reality. There is a dialog with Deleuze and Guattari, both together and singly, throughout the manuscript. For their interpretation of the “body without organs” as a ‘virtual’ body see especially the discussion in chapters V (“Artaud’s ‘cure’”) and VI (“The spherical body”).

²⁵ Artaud XIV:1, 1978, p. 151.

²⁶ Here Artaud’s denunciation of religion and the occult in a 1 March 1947 letter to André Breton is representative, see “Cinq Lettres à André Breton,” in Antonin Artaud. *Oeuvres*. Ed. Évelyne Grossman. Paris: Gallimard/Quarto, 2004. pp. 1207-18.

²⁷ This project walks the difficult tightrope, as it must, of crediting Artaud’s immense lucidity while attempting to take into account his equally immense suffering born from possibly congenital neurological difficulties and ensuing drug addiction at the hands of doctors (like many, Artaud first became an addict on the prescriptions given him by his doctor). The word ‘dementia’ here is no confirmation of the usual psychiatric or psychological terminology towards Artaud, but is more along the lines of the insight found in as different thinkers as Deleuze, Lacan, and Jung, that the path of human individuation is not necessarily neurotic, as Freud argued, but at every critical point runs the risk of psychosis.

gesture has been but rarely followed up upon.²⁸ What is important for my own study is showing how it is the result of a transformation in ritual space and time – the infinity of the gesture with its rage to evoke the “true body” in the late Artaud eclipses subordination to any spatial or social or metaphysical configuration, and that already marks it as different from the vast majority of traditional or tribal rituals. This eclipse is most clear in Artaud’s sound works, his 1946-8 radio broadcasts,²⁹ with his *To have done with the judgment of god* (1947-8) positing a last will and testament, an invitation to step beyond the patternings of reality into an unconditioned one. Even Jacques Derrida, who argued in his early essays on Artaud that he was trapped by the forms of representation he railed against, concluded in his final interview before his death in October 2004 of Artaud’s voice that “once you’ve heard it, you can no longer silence it. And so you have to read him with *his* voice, the phantom of his voice that you have to keep inside your ear... Those few recordings of the voice of Artaud are an essential part of what remains to us of his body, of his body’s work.”³⁰ Artaud’s late work is a wild thrust at immortality, with image, words, and screams impacted and posed for maximum effect. It is not a call for a “work” to continue to live, in the sense of art Foucault was evoking, or as in the case of an author who wants his books’ reputations to go on long after his or her death – with Artaud this is something more corporeal and more primal. It is also more difficult to fathom. What I present here, in Artaud’s transformation of ritual space/time into the projection of the “body without organs” where any hieroglyphic patterning is jettisoned, is a proposal at furthering the understanding of this artist whose voice still resounds and yet is inadequately deciphered even now, in the early decades of the 21st century.

²⁸ A salient exception is the Butoh experiments of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno. See the brief outline concerning Butoh in chapter I.

²⁹ See the section “The voice at the end of the world” in chapter VI.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Les voix d’Artaud (la force, la forme, la forge),” *Magazine Littéraire* 434 (September 2004): 34-6. p. 36.