

RITUAL AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Edited by

Thomas Crombez and Barbara Gronau

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RITUAL AND THE AVANT-GARDE: INTRODUCTION

Thomas CROMBEZ & Barbara GRONAU

Since the heyday of the post-war avant-garde has passed, the vocabulary of ritualism has entered into mainstream theatre. Is it a coincidence that two European directors, who were once considered part of the avant-garde, have recently penetrated the ‘citadels’ of traditional theatre, and moreover did so with ritualistic productions in a pseudo-medieval garb? In the summer of 2001, Jan Fabre was invited to let the dancer-knights of *Je suis sang* mount the stage in the imposing fortress of the Palais des Papes at Avignon. In November 2005, Hermann Nitsch brought the blindfolded, crucified and naked actors of his *Orgies Mysterieuses Theatre* into the Burgtheater, the very stronghold of the Austrian bourgeois establishment he had fought for decades.

Has ritualistic art degraded into kitsch, as the armoured knights and sacrificial virgins of Fabre and Nitsch suggest? Or has the ritualist vocabulary now simply become an integral part of the rich, ‘postdramatic’ theatrical language that contemporary artists can employ?

Indeed, many directors are integrating elements from the ritualistic ‘tradition’ into their work. By opting for a physical acting style influenced by performance and body art, for a visual dramaturgy, and for a strongly symbolical, often dream-like scenographic compositions—instead of textual dramaturgy and realistic acting and scenography—a coherent body of theatrical work has established itself since the 1980s. Hans-Thies Lehmann adequately described it in his seminal work *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999). Directors such as Robert Wilson, Tadeusz Kantor, Einar Schlee, Klaus Michaël Grüber, Jan Fabre, Romeo Castellucci, Christoph Marthaler, and Jan Lauwers have re-established the relevance of a certain ‘ritualistic quality’ of theatrical art. In these productions, the performers’ bodies, actions and words are immersed in a rarefied atmosphere that feels related to the very medium of religious ritual.

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the avant-gardes introduced the relevance of ritual to modern art. Before we may gauge the precise value of today’s ritualism, the *ritualistic ‘tradition’ of the avant-garde* therefore deserves our attention.

The interest for rituals at the end of the nineteenth century is motivated by the fundamental crisis that European culture confronts. While the basic concepts of

modernity—such as perception, representation, and subjectivity—are devaluated, the recourse to pagan motives and ritualistic practices seem to promise a forgotten holistic approach. Whether they take the form of ancient tradition or exotic folklore, rituals seem to provide a fascinating outlook on something beyond the logos of the modern bourgeois individual. Therefore it is hardly surprising that Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie* from 1871 draws an image of redemption by linking the Greek cult of Dionysus to the music of Richard Wagner. One can take Nietzsche's text as the initial spark of a discourse that emphasizes that not only the arts, but also culture in general, have to recover their transgressive potential by taking up their ritualistic roots.

With James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), Arnold van Gennep's *Les Rites de passage* (1909), and Emile Durkheim's *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), rituals are also at the centre of the upcoming discipline of ethnology. As much as the scientific view on rituals produced a variety of definitions, the artistic avant-garde never seemed to have a clear concept of ritual, but instead takes the term as some kind of 'discursive void'—an open source for imaginations, materials, and practices. As well as increasingly rhythmic dance-movements (such as in Igor Strawinsky's *Le sacre du printemps* from 1913) there appeared repetitive patterns of sound or language (for example, in the dadaist performances) and a specific kind of costumes, light effects, and set design which were part of the artistic re-ritualization.

Although many prominent artists of the historical avant-garde were highly fascinated by the artistic potential of rituals (amongst which Oskar Kokoschka, Oskar Schlemmer, the Futurist theatre designers, and many artists from Surrealism) it is Antonin Artaud who has become known as the pre-eminent advocate of ritual. For Artaud, a 'physical' language for the theatre, inspired by Eastern forms of performance such as the Cambodian and Balinese dance theatre, would be able to rediscover the therapeutical efficacy of theatrical events, and by doing so remedy the grave crisis of modernity made evident in the wake of the First World War.

In the first essay Thomas Crombez examines how Artaud's preconceptions have shaped the conceptions of ritual that were developed mainly after the Second World War. For many post-war intellectuals and artists, 'Artaud'—or rather, the emblematic image of the insane and suffering Artaud—became paradigmatic for a new conception of theatre and counterculture. Post-war society in Europe and the US was highly in need of figures like Artaud, who symbolized the most extreme and subversive attitude in regard to social structure and conventional art. As is

evidenced by the many re-editions and translations of his writings from the fifties onwards, Artaud became a contemporary during the first decades after the Second World War. This cultural ‘need’ has profoundly influenced our contemporary idea of ritualism in the theatre. However, Crombez also tries to show what *other* conceptions of ritual have been possible since the First World War, but were not successful in establishing themselves.

Two subsequent articles further explore the ritualistic heritage of Artaud. Günter Berghaus undertakes a practice-based re-examination of Artaud’s outstanding surrealist play *Le Jet de sang* (1925), and finds his ritualistic interest expressed through a whole range of exasperating theatrical innovations. Luk Van den Dries shows how the obvious ‘ritualistic’ interpretation of Jan Fabre’s work in the light of Artaud may be avoided. He rather tries to chart the other meeting points between the oeuvre of Fabre and that of Artaud: the topos of pain, personal cruelty, the affective athleticism of performers, and the search for an alternative stage language of signs and icons.

We return to a more historically oriented analysis of ritualism with the article of Barbara Gronau on the ‘secular rituals’ of post-war performance artist Joseph Beuys. Still, Beuys’ work simultaneously demonstrates a strong fascination with the properly religious content of ritual. It is no accident that his ‘secular rituals’ were full of references to iconical gestures and rites from the Christian tradition. What the essays collected here most clearly show, is that the fascination with the social potential of rituals was nearly always connected to a certain ‘religious’ tendency—even if the relation of these artists to established religion was often problematic.

This collection of essays closes with a contemporary case study of precisely this anthropological and religious problematic. Mario Bühmann and Heiner Remmert study the writings and recent performances of the Austrian *Aktionskünstler* Hermann Nitsch, asking if ritualism has indeed, after a long and fruitful career throughout twentieth century theatre, degraded into kitsch.

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This collection of essays, edited by Thomas Crombez and Barbara Gronau resulted from the workshop on “Ritual, Theatre, Community” held at the University of Antwerp (5 May 2007). The workshop was co-funded by a research grant from the Antwerp University Association and a conference grant from FWO-Vlaanderen (Research Foundation – Flanders).

AVANT-GARDE HERITAGE: THREE CONCEPTS OF RITUALISM FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Thomas CROMBEZ

Abstract

What exactly do we mean when, in the contemporary performing arts, the word ritual is pronounced? I argue that, although one main concept of theatrical ritualism is currently activated, the history of twentieth-century theatre offers at least two alternative notions that were less successful at establishing themselves. The dominant notion may be termed 'hot' ritual, and is chiefly inspired by the writings of Antonin Artaud. The first alternative notion will be termed 'minimalist' ritual (strongly related to the Fluxus movement and happening art), the second 'liturgical.' Conspicuously, the theatrical-liturgical efforts of the interbellum period transmitted no legacy to post-war European theatre.

In his essay from 1974, 'From Ritual to Theatre and Back,' Richard Schechner attempted to explain what crucial aspects of ritual had made it so attractive to the avant-garde artists of the twentieth century. Schechner identified 'efficacy' as the defining characteristic of ritual, in contrast to theatre—either the sacred efficacy of religious ritual, remediating the community's relationship to the divine, or the social efficacy of rituals such as wedding ceremonies or rites of passage, that change the social status of some of its participants.

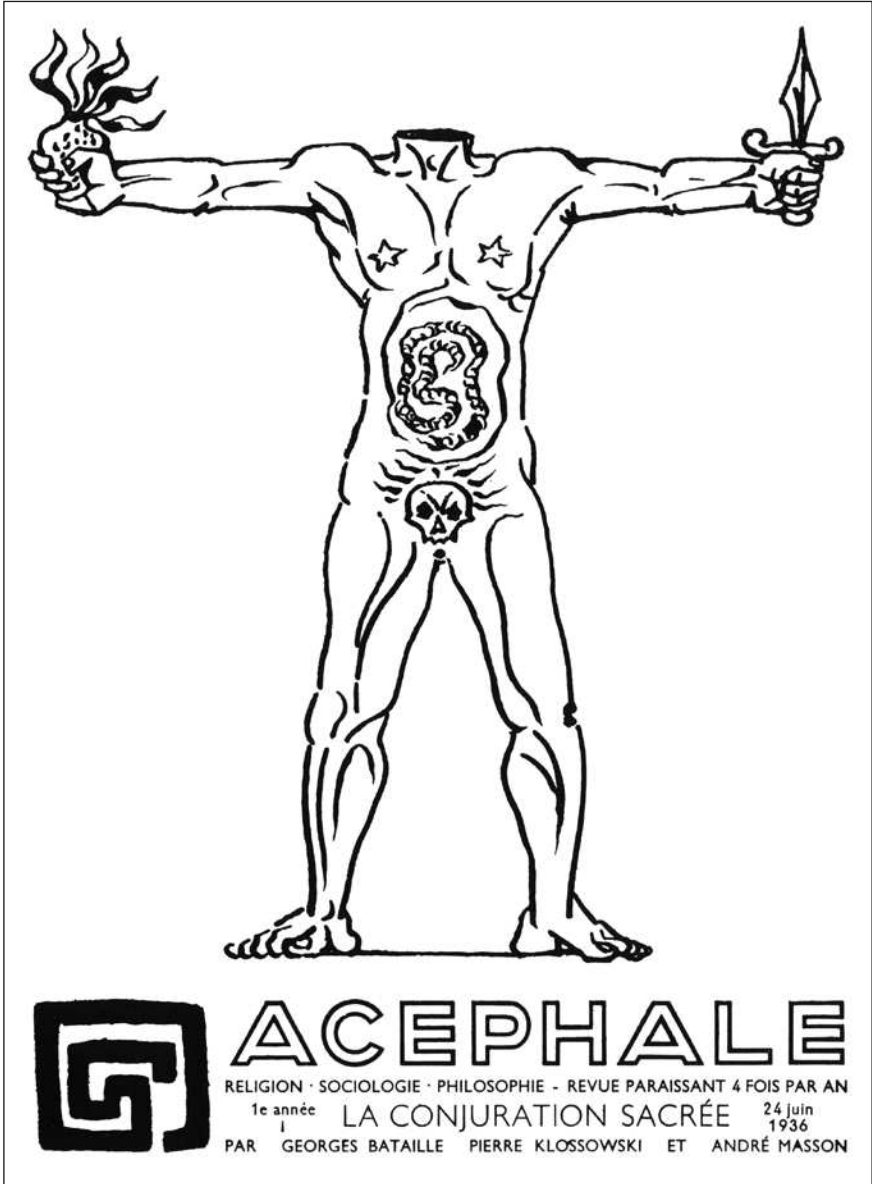
But after generations of avant-garde artists have attempted to rediscover this fabled 'efficacy' in the most various ways, the question may be posed whether ritualism is still a credible alternative for the continued reinvention of Western theatre. High-profile productions such as Jan Fabre's *Je suis sang* at the Festival d'Avignon (2001), or the *122nd Action* by Hermann Nitsch at the famous Burgtheater in Vienna (2005), throw doubt on the conception of ritualistic theatre as a critical instrument to expose the hidden or repressed truths of Western society. Ritualism—the artistic *mise-en-scène* of rituals—rather seems to have become an integral part of the society of spectacle. In the caustic phrasing of Roland Barthes: 'L'avant-garde n'est jamais qu'une façon de chanter la mort bourgeoise, car sa propre mort appartient encore à la bourgeoisie ...'¹

With Fabre and Nitsch, the bourgeois swan song has turned into the death rattle of armoured knights and sacrificial virgins. The critical attitude, already institutionalized, now lapses into ritualistic kitsch. But kitsch cannot appear as such without being related to a widespread cliché. These two directors merely make manifest that ‘ritualism’ itself is a problematic category. What exactly do we conceive when, in the contemporary performing arts, the word ritual is pronounced?

I will argue that there is one main concept of theatrical ritualism currently activated, and that there are at least two viable alternative notions to be found in the history of twentieth-century theatre and theatrical theory. The dominant notion may be termed ‘hot’ ritual (on the analogy of classical sociological theories on the role of effervescent ceremonies in the genesis of morality—e.g., in the work of Emile Durkheim²). The first alternative notion will be termed ‘minimalist’ ritual, the second ‘liturgical.’

The hot concept of ritual is based on certain ideas of the *historical* avant-garde, as they were interpreted and put into practice by the *post-war* (or ‘neo-’) avant-garde. This historical detour subsequently weighted the original, pre-war theories. ‘Hot ritual’ was inspired (at least partially) by the writings of Antonin Artaud, but, from the 1960s on, he was invariably read through the lens of a certain body of post-war performances. This thread of ritualism includes so-called ‘physical theatre’ by groups such as the Living Theatre, The Performance Group, Grotowski’s Laboratory Theatre, and the numerous international disciples of the Polish director’s workshops. It was reinforced by the simultaneous emergence of body art and performance art, practiced by Yves Klein, Yoko Ono, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann, and many others.

However, other trends in music and visual arts led to a second and different understanding of ritual. This ritualistic current, which I dub ‘minimalist,’ originated in the sphere of Fluxus. Artists such as (in the US) John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Allan Kaprow, George Maciunas, and (in Europe) Joseph Beuys, Ben Vautier, and Marcel Broodthaers moved towards a conception of ritualistic events far less related to eruptive, pseudo-Dionysiac gatherings. Rather, these ‘untitled events’ and happenings were based on chance phenomena, *objets trouvés*, improvised materials, humor, and—certainly in Kaprow’s case—a certain ‘quiet’ quality often described as related to meditation and Buddhist ceremony. I wish to examine this particular quality further by means of the theoretical works of the French sociologist and philosopher Georges Bataille. Admittedly, Bataille seems at first sight more connected to the ‘hot’ concept of ritual, although I will argue that he ultimately came closest to the minimalist notion.



First issue of *Acéphale* (June 1936), the literary and philosophical journal founded by Georges Bataille

A third conception of ritual was even less prominent, and did not manage to last until the present day. This conception was introduced by modernist productions from the interwar period based on Catholic liturgy. Throughout my exploration of the alternative concepts of ritualism, the guiding question will be: why does 'ritual' in the performing arts today look the way we expect it to look?

Antonin Artaud's Theory of Catharsis

As a starting point for describing the presence of ritualism in the writings of Antonin Artaud, one cannot overlook his most explicit socio-theatrical concept, namely, that of collective purification. It is a topos in Artaud studies that the theory of the Theatre of Cruelty also encompasses a cathartic doctrine.³ The necessity to reflect on social healing stems from the diagnosis of the apocalyptic cultural philosopher Artaud that Western culture is being eroded by a 'crisis.' Expressed in the most extreme terms: 'nous sommes tous fous, désespérés et malades.'⁴ In that regard Artaud's opinions are positioned within the framework of popular occultism and a fascination for Eastern philosophy.

In 'Le Théâtre et la Culture,' the essay that introduces *Le Théâtre et son Double* (1938) as an ominous prelude, this crisis is alluded to the least vaguely. A schism between 'life' and 'culture' results in a certain quantum of negative but vital energy, which no longer finds a safety valve via culture, but is expressed in perverse felonies, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and train disasters.⁵ As Goodall remarked, Artaud's cathartic solution for that problem is to be found in keeping with Paracelsic homeopathy, which was provided to him by Dr. René Allendy.⁶ Evil must be conquered by its equal, in this case by a theatrical reinforcement factor: 'le théâtre est fait pour vider collectivement des abcès.'⁷ The intensity of the theatrical happening fuses actor and spectator together into an association which allows the negative energy to course through in a therapeutically effective way.

Artaud attached great importance to mass theatre. He undertook various attempts to organize such a spectacle.⁸ Consequently, the *collective* aspect of Artaudian catharsis must be underlined. The emphasis is predominantly on the theatre as a means of mutual purification, and even socio-political pacification. In some areas Artaud confesses to an extremely naive belief in a violent theatre as a deterrent for the masses: 'je défie bien un spectateur à qui des scènes violentes auront passé leur sang (...) de se livrer au dehors à des idées de guerre, d'émeute et d'assassinat hasardeux.'⁹ Artaud confesses to an idealistic doctrine regarding the



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *Je suis sang (conte de fées médiéval)* (2001).
Performers: Heike Langsdorf, Cedric Charron, Ivana Jozic
(amongst others). Photo by Wonge Bergmann**

operation of the theatre, entirely according to the ‘heilsame Schauer’ that, according to Friedrich Schiller, would make a deep impression on the audience.¹⁰

The predominant image of Artaud’s ideas was greatly influenced by the way they were disseminated after his death in 1948. An ‘Artaud myth’ developed that read his pre-war writings through the lens of the final years.¹¹ Artaud became the archetypal nemesis of social order as such. In his ravaged body was inscribed the demand to liberate the individual from the constraints that the social system had installed. Especially his long psychiatric internment influenced this reading of his life and works, together with the much-publicized events of his return to public life between 1945 and 1948, such as the excruciating ‘performance’ at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, *Histoire Vécue D’ARTAUD-MOMO* (13 January 1947).

The Artaud myth easily fitted in with the neo-avant-garde performing arts developing after the Second World War. Post-war counterculture had many interests in common with Artaud. It explored occultism and believed that dreams, narcot-

ics, and spontaneous and accidental activities should inspire the arts. Artaud's strong criticism of Western society was responsible for the principal attraction of his work for theatre reformers like Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Julian Beck and Judith Malina.¹² This in turn fostered the hypothesis that post-war ritualistic performance was the true realization of Artaud's original theories. Ritualism gradually became understood as the need for therapeutic, collective theatrical events that smashed the existing social order and replaced it with an authentic and intense, if short-lived, experience of *communitas*.¹³ Thus, the Artaudian notion of social crisis and purification, realized (in a certain way) through the post-war emergence of physical and environmental theatre, provided the basis for a 'hot' concept of ritual in the performing arts.

The Minimalist Fluxus Concept of Ritual

When contrasted with the ritualized and primitivist happenings from post-war theatre, most events organized by Fluxus artists seem rather light-headed and frivolous. John Cage himself advocated a kind of theatre that would be indistinguishable from normal life: '[T]he reason I want to make my definition of theater that simple is so one could view everyday life itself as theater.'¹⁴ The essence of the theatrical is to be found in the eye of the beholder, an ideal Fluxus spectator, or 'everyday life artist.'

In this regard, the abundant 'scores' for minimalist happenings that Allan Kaprow produced, may be considered to constitute a second, if minor, paradigm for ritualism. Consider, for example, the score of *Taking a shoe for a walk* (undated):

Pulling a shoe on a string through the city
 examining the shoe from time to time, to see if it's worn out
 wrapping your own shoe, after each examination, with layers of bandage or tape,
 in the amount you think the shoe on a string is worn out
 repeating, adding to your shoe more layers of bandage or tape, until, at the end of
 the day, the shoe you are pulling appears completely worn out¹⁵

Taking a shoe for a walk might be labelled subversive, because its performer will, in an ordinary town or city, probably be frowned upon by passers-by. He might even be considered a tramp and treated accordingly. Yet its main theme is not a critique or commentary on public life. It is precisely everyday life itself, or rather, the isolated and slightly queer, but ultimately rather harmless and insignificant action itself. To act out *Taking a shoe for a walk* means literally nothing more

but to execute the described steps, regardless of the context of the performance, nor of the attitude the performer takes towards it—either in a concentrated and contemplative way, or merely bored and tired, or compelled to do it by someone else. The score stipulates the details of an action that is purely self-referential. It might very well invite the actor to reconsider his life and discover a fundamental wisdom in the process. But it might just as well not.

No theoretical ancestor or ‘mastermind’ is equally strongly connected to the Fluxus events, as Artaud was to the pseudo-Dionysiac spectacles. Certainly Dada would qualify, albeit primarily on a practical level. Dadaists (and also, to a certain degree, Situationists) strove to transform the chance happenings and idiosyncrasies of everyday life into art. But they did not provide an elaborate theoretical framework for those attempts. However, there is a surprising degree of correspondence between Fluxus events and the writings of Georges Bataille.

In Bataille’s articles of the late 1930s for the *Acéphale* journal, and in the events he organized with the eponymous ‘secret society,’ a concept of ritual appears that fits Fluxus surprisingly well. At first sight, however, Bataille’s starting point is similar (almost verbatim) to that of Artaud. The *Acéphale* project, Bataille notes in the first issue, ‘ne peut pas être limité à l’expression d’une pensée et encore moins à ce qui est justement considéré comme art.’¹⁶ It is rather to be compared to a kind of political agitation, animated by the same force of nature that drives us to producing and consuming food. In the same vein, Artaud commences his reflections on culture with the derogatory remark that: ‘Avant d’en revenir à la culture je considère que le monde a faim, et qu’il ne se soucie pas de la culture.’¹⁷ It follows (at least in Artaud’s mind) that, once human hunger is stilled, it ought to be the residue of hunger that drives humans towards culture, not some lofty and self-sufficient ideal.

Equally similar is their apocalyptic diagnosis of the total crisis engulfing Western society. It is only concerning the proposed remedies that Bataille starts to differ from Artaud’s opinions, although this is only manifest from the *Acéphale* texts onwards. Earlier in the 1930s, the anti-fascist group Contre-Attaque—in which not only Bataille, but also André Breton and many diverse intellectuals from the left were involved—had called for a revolutionary uprising. The masses would conquer the streets, driven by ‘l’émotion soulevée directement par des événements frappants.’¹⁸ This sounds highly similar to Artaud’s description of the public agitation accompanying a police raid on a brothel, which he described as ‘the ideal theatre.’¹⁹

In 1937, however, Contre-Attaque had stranded, and Bataille's search for an event that would embody the sacral in modern society turned inwards. In his theoretical essays from the early 1930s, the sociologist Bataille had studied the phenomenon of 'dépense pure' (pure expenditure).²⁰ The concept he derived from non-Western social ceremonies, such as the *potlatch* of certain Native American tribes (reciprocal gift-giving in which wealth is redistributed or sometimes destroyed, bestowing a higher social status on the giver). Such festivals were a prime example of a wider category of social phenomena he dubbed 'the heterogeneous.' It also included eroticism, waste, religious sacrifice, art works, and generally speaking all sorts of expenditure that did not contribute to rational and economically productive goals.

It was phenomena of unproductive expenditure, Bataille believed, that made human community truly possible. Their disappearance in over-rationalized Western societies had also hastened the disintegration of the social fabric. Parallel to the *Acéphale* journal, a 'secret society' also called Acéphale was founded to rekindle events of pure expenditure. It remains unclear what events Bataille precisely scheduled for the members of the group. Even taking into account the documents disclosed by Marina Galletti,²¹ the following description by Botting and Wilson can hardly be augmented:

Particularly interested in sacrifice, the group met in secret and in locations like the Place de la Concorde, where Louis XVI was executed. They also met in ominous places deep in the woods where plans were made for a human sacrifice, an act of criminal violence that would bind the group together in shared guilt.²²

In any case, Bataille conceived the happenings as pure 'play,' according to the definition that Johan Huizinga would give around the same time in his book *Homo Ludens* (published in Dutch in 1938). 'If we consider it in the perspective of a world determined by forces and their effects, it is a *superabundans* in the full meaning of the word, something that is superfluous.'²³ Especially (religious) sacrifice appealed to Bataille, as the perfect example of a sacred act that was wholly isolated from the world of reason and economic production, i.e., an act of total freedom. 'Si elle n'est pas libre, l'existence devient vide ou neutre et, si elle est libre, elle est un jeu.'²⁴ In this regard Bataille's vision is quite different from that of Artaud. His theory of ritualist theatre was clearly aimed toward collective purification. That of Bataille, on the contrary, aspired to wholly self-contained acts of pure expenditure. His scripts for the Acéphale happenings strictly stipulated what was to happen, but it never turned into a spectacle, nor was there an audience.



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *Je suis sang (conte de fées médiéval)* (2001).
Performers: Ivana Jozic, Katrien Bruyneel, Anny Czupper.
Photo by Wonge Bergmann**

Catholic Liturgy and Modernist Theatre

During his activities with the Surrealist movement in the 1920s, Artaud co-edited an issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* entitled 'Fin de l'ère chrétienne.' Bataille's *Acéphale* was to be a religious community, and even 'savagely religious,' but only 'in a violently anti-Christian sense.'²⁵ Both models for contemporary ritualism that I have discussed were based on anti-Christian ideas. But the interwar period also saw diverse theatrical reformers advocate the need for a *return* to Christianity. T.S. Eliot stated, in 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry' (1928), that: 'The only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is in a High Mass well performed' (Eliot 1972: 47). In the same vein, the French dramatist Paul Claudel's artistic conclusion was to introduce liturgical elements in the texture of his plays. In *Le Masque et l'encensoir* (1921), Gaston Baty developed a similar intuition into a historical essay on the origins of theatre. Religious ceremony, and most importantly, medieval Catholic liturgy, was the true dramatic phenomenon, because it had integrated all dramatic components—the spoken text and the non-verbal elements of spectacle—into a harmonious whole.²⁶

Catholic liturgy, however, also posed a tremendous problem to modernist theatre practitioners. Convinced that theatre should break out of the autonomy of art, and approach the efficacy of ritual, it was unclear how this efficacy was to be understood or realized. However great their admiration, few modernists went so far as to strive for a genre truly in-between religious practice and modern drama. They tried to imbue the existing Western theatre with the powers of liturgy, but were reluctant to demand the creation of a new dramatic genre that would truly reinvent liturgy for the modern age. Others, however, unhesitatingly stated that such a form could be developed. Its creators should be the ideologically organized masses of the interwar period.

Mass theatre was a popular expression of 'community art' in most European countries during the interbellum period. From Max Reinhardt's lavish open-air spectacles (such as *Everyman* in Salzburg, 1920) to the Soviet restagings of the Storming of the Winter Palace in Leningrad, or the Socialist workers' *Laienspiel* (lay theatre), theatre visionaries focused on ever larger groups for entertainment as well as political agitation. Among Western European countries, Belgium was one of the last to follow the new trend of socio-theatrical events. It was imported via the Socialist movement from Germany and Russia, passing through the Netherlands where workers' choirs (both singing and reciting choirs) had quickly risen in favour. In the case of Belgium, and Flanders in particular, it is especially interesting to note that the mass theatre phenomenon displayed an ideological heteroge-

neity not seen elsewhere. Catholicism soon appropriated the Socialist idea of lay theatre and choral training. Reciting choirs and movement choirs, composed of amateurs, were trained by theatre and dance professionals to participate in mass events that celebrated key moments of the Catholic renouveau of the 1930s. Key events include the mass play of the Catholic youth movement KAJ (Katholieke Arbeiders Jeugd), directed by Lode Geysen (Brussels, Heysel Stadium, 1935), the Rerum Novarum play *Bevrijding* (*Liberation*, Antwerp, 1936), and Jozef Boon's *uis Christi: The Play of the Holy Blood* (Bruges, 1938).

In his book *Spreekkoor en Massatooneel* (1937), Jozef Boon reported on an interesting and untitled choral drama he directed in the town of Diest with a group of 100 students, on the occasion of the feast of Saint Jan Berchmans, the students' patron saint. The action took place on the local marketplace, and Boon had intentionally placed his chorus on a raised podium, so that it could 'dominate the market,' i.e., the audience of 2000 students that would respond to the reciting choir.²⁷ The happening was adequately framed against the imposing backdrop of Diest's Gothic church. The relics of Saint Jan Berchmans were displayed in front of the church portal, and the carillon played music composed by Arthur Meulemans, a frequent collaborator of Boon's mass plays. Particularly striking about the Diest mass spectacle is that Boon strove to integrate his choral drama with the official church festivities devoted to Saint Jan Berchmans. The bishop and the clerics who participated were explicitly designated as 'being part of the choral drama.'²⁸ Indeed, the event ended with a huge open-air celebration of Mass. If one is to believe Boon himself, the event truly 'conquered' its attendance.

Conclusion

During and after the Second World War, the popularity of mass theatre quickly declined. The urgent task of rebuilding war-torn Europe apparently left little space for mass agitation and grand ideological displays. However, it remains a striking fact that the theatrical-liturgical efforts of the interbellum period transmitted no legacy to post-war European theatre. When confronted with wholly new types of ritualistic events—physical and environmental theatre, Dionysiac performance events, and Fluxus happenings—Catholic liturgy had completely disappeared from the general frame of reference. Instead, post-war performance studies avidly picked up such anti-Christian theories from the pre-war avant-garde as Surrealism, Dadaism, and especially the writings of Artaud and Bataille. It is worth reminding that, at certain junctions of history, other concepts of ritual have been possible.

Notes

- 1 BARTHES, Roland, 'À l'avant-garde de quel théâtre?', in: *Théâtre populaire*, May 1956; republished in: *Écrits sur le théâtre*, ed. J.-L. Rivière, Seuil, Paris, 2002, p. 203.
- 2 ADLOFF, Frank, 'Beyond Interests and Norms: Toward a Theory of Gift-Giving and Reciprocity in Modern Societies', in: *Constellations*, 13, 3 (2006), p. 410.
- 3 See, e.g., VIRMAUX, Alain and Odette, *Artaud: Un Bilan critique*, Belfond, Paris, 1979, pp. 295-6; GOODALL, Jane, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 107; INNES, Christopher, *Avant-Garde Theatre 1892-1992*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 59-60.
- 4 ARTAUD, Antonin, *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976-, vol. 4, p. 75; compare pp. 9-11, 40, 72, 85, 112.
- 5 ARTAUD, *idem*, vol. 4, pp. 10-11, 216; vol. 5, p. 166.
- 6 GOODALL, pp. 106-107.
- 7 ARTAUD, *idem*, vol. 4, p. 30; compare p. 58 and vol. 5, pp. 153ff.
- 8 ARTAUD, *idem*, vol. 2, p. 162; vol. 3, pp. 167-168, 215-217; vol. 4, pp. 72, 83, 324; vol. 5, pp. 152-154; compare KRZYWKOWSKI, Isabelle, 'Le côté révélateur de la matière: Masques, mannequins et machines dans le théâtre d'Antonin Artaud (1920-1935)' in PENOT-LACASSAGNE, Olivier, ed., *Artaud et les avant-gardes théâtrales*, Lettres Modernes Minard, Paris, 2005, pp. 31-32.
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- 21 BATAILLE, Georges, *L'Apprenti Sorcier: Textes, lettres et documents (1932-1939)*,

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ARTAUD'S *LE JET DE SANG*: AN UNPERFORMABLE SURREALIST PLAY?

Günter BERGHAUS

Abstract

The unfeasible demands of Artaud's surrealist plays, amongst which Le Jet de sang (1925), gave rise to the assumption that he was pursuing an 'impossible theatre.' In this essay, I refute this reading by discussing, firstly, Artaud's work as a theatre director in 1927-29 and Peter Brook's Theatre-of-Cruelty season in 1964 and, in the second part, by reporting on a renewed attempt at staging the 'unperformable' Le Jet de sang (at Bristol University's Department of Drama, in 1996).

Le Jet de sang is a text of merely eight pages, written in 1925 and published the same year by Gallimard.¹ The play is not only short, it also seems to make unfeasible demands on anybody trying to give it a scenic realization. Its stage directions such as 'two stars crash into each other, and we see a number of live pieces of human bodies falling down: hands, feet, scalps (...) with a maddening, vomit-inducing slowness' gave rise to the assumption that Artaud was pursuing an 'impossible theatre', a notion much reinforced by the first professional production by Peter Brook in the London Season of Cruelty in 1964, generally judged to have been a total flop. The need for theatrical spirituality and ritual-like enactments that arose during the sixties and seventies made Artaud a patron saint of the so-called ritual theatre movement and created—especially in the Anglo-Saxon world—an image of this practitioner as an ultra-authentic performer and director.² Selected passages from his theoretical writings (of which only a very small number had been translated) combined with a pronounced dearth of documentation of his practical work in the theatre facilitated a 'ritualistic' interpretation of Artaud, suggesting that his plays and productions were flawed from the very beginning and that he strove for something that was unattainable in actual theatre practice.

In this essay, I should like to refute this reading by discussing, in the first part, Artaud's work as a theatre director in 1927-29 and Peter Brook's Theatre-of-Cruelty season in 1964 and, in the second part, by reporting on a renewed attempt at staging the 'unperformable' *Le Jet de sang*.

Artaud's Productions at the Théâtre Alfred Jarry

As its subtitle *La Boule de verre* indicates, *Le Jet de sang* was originally conceived of as a parody of an Armand Salacrou play.³ In 1926, it was slated to be performed as part of the first season of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, the first theatre company founded by Artaud (together with Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron). The short text would have been an appropriate item in the repertoire of this highly original and experimental venture, as it shared a great many similarities with Alfred Jarry's bewildering stage language. For unknown reasons, in the first show (1 and 2 June 1927) *Le Jet de sang* was replaced by *Ventre brûlé*, a rather hallucinatory scenario with many highly intense physical actions and without much dialogue.⁴ We therefore do not know how Artaud intended *Le Jet de sang* to be performed. We can only assume that he would have used a method that was similar to those he employed in his other directional enterprises during the Théâtre Alfred Jarry period.

The eight performances of the four productions that Artaud managed to present to his Parisian audiences were only seen by a small number of people and were rather controversially received. Artaud's intention to shock his audiences meant that reviewers used more lines for describing the scandals that surrounded the shows than analyzing the actions presented on stage. It is therefore difficult to arrive at a balanced and impartial assessment of Artaud's work as a theatre director.⁵ Furthermore, the Théâtre Alfred Jarry was a rather marginal enterprise: playhouses were hired for only a few performances either in the afternoons or on off-days; half-hearted actors were reigned in from other theatres and were given few rehearsals in which to familiarize themselves with Artaud's directorial concepts. Some of the rehearsals had to take place in the house of the group's financier, Dr Allendy; in one case the cast did not even have a single run-through on stage. Actors dropped out of the production, often at last minute under false pretences, which caused one reviewer to lament that there were 'trop peu de répétitions pour que les acteurs novices fussent maîtres d'un texte qui les déroutait autant que les spectateurs.'⁶ As there was no technical support crew, it was difficult to locate props, sets and costumes and make them function properly on stage. Consequently, there were lots of arguments within the cast. Under those circumstances it is not astonishing that many of Artaud's ideas could not be fully realized on stage.

Nonetheless, what Artaud finally managed to present to his invited audiences opened up a new agenda in the theatre of his time. Reviewers tended to be rather skeptical of the productions and the scandals they aroused; but when they had some positive things to write it was usually related to Artaud's direction.⁷

The Théâtre Alfred Jarry

A large part of volume 2 of Artaud's *Œuvres Complètes* is taken up with statements that indicate how the Théâtre Alfred Jarry was supposed to have worked and how it was to have affected its audiences. This allows to discern a few general trends in Artaud's attitude as a director.

Artaud avoided the fake theatricality that was customary in Parisian playhouses. He was an inveterate enemy not only of illusionistic scene painting and papier-maché constructions, but also of the glitz and glamour, the trickery and scam stagecraft that passed as acting in his days. Whenever his actors took recourse to the routines of the trade, Artaud intervened. Instead of playing characters, the actors were encouraged to portray types, in line with Artaud's statement: 'Les personnages seront systématiquement poussés au type.'⁸ Artaud believed that such a depersonalized acting style stripped of all naturalist psychology would bring out the underlying, subconscious motivations of the stage figures. Jarry had pursued a similar aim with his marionette theatre, but as one of Artaud's actors reported, with him 'les gestes des acteurs devaient être ceux d'automates plutôt que des marionnettes: précis, saccadés, antinaturels même.'⁹ Artaud, so it appears, had translated the surrealist technique of automatic writing into something akin to 'automatic acting.' He sought to structure the actors' movements and gestures in a rhythmic fashion and to give them a dynamic dimension full of abrupt breaks and changes of directions. When combined with a vocal work of a similar physical expressivity, a highly artificial acting style emerged that had little in common with social behaviour in everyday life.

The text provided by the playwright was nothing more than material that could be used, moulded, heightened, or deformed. Artaud's approach to the voice was geared towards a dismantling of the common use of language in everyday speech. The subjective quality of the actor's vocal characteristics was linked to the role s/he was presenting on stage. Like gestures and movements they were, as Artaud stated, 'visible signs of an invisible or secret language (...) where the heart's most secret movements will be exposed' ('signes visibles d'un langage invisibles ou secret (...) où les ressorts les plus secrètes du cœur seront mis à nu').¹⁰ Therefore, he encouraged his actors to use their vocal apparatus to externalize the character's subconscious urges.

In all of Artaud's productions, the actors' work was complemented by sound effects and music, the aim of which was to affect the audiences' sensibilities and put them into a state of heightened awareness of the emotions underlying the stage

actions. A similar function was attributed to lighting. It was employed to enhance the theatrical character of the objects and actions on stage. But most of all, it was a means of bringing out hidden aspects of the scene and to allude to the characters' subconscious motivations.

The same anti-Naturalist tendencies could be observed in Artaud's treatment of the décor. Artaud continued a line of development already initiated by Jarry at the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ The stage sets did not have the purpose of reproducing, in an illusionistic manner, the realities of an outer world, but rather functioned in accordance with the deeper logic of the dream world. Décor, like props, were real objects, not fake theatrical scenery, and had been chosen for their suggestive power rather than illustrative properties.

In this respect it was an advantage that the company had no access to prop stores and could not avail themselves to the bric-a-brac that usually cluttered the Parisian stages of the time. Artaud was adamant in his demand that scenery and props had to be real and tangible, because, one of his actors explained, 'la vérité d'Artaud correspond sans doute à la vérité de certains sorciers d'Afrique.'¹²

A Season of Cruelty

For many years, Artaud was best known for his theoretical writings. They were much translated and exercised a profound influence on theatre artists in the 1960s and 70s, so much in fact that, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon theatre world, a popular image arose of Artaud as a gifted and inspirational theoretician and a failed practitioner. A dense fog of cultish 'criticism' has further clouded Artaud's early work, to the effect that few of his plays were ever mounted on stage. They acquired a reputation of being 'unperformable', a view that was further reinforced by Peter Brook's production of *Le Jet de sang* as part of the Theatre of Cruelty season in London in 1964.

In 1963, Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz planned a production of Genet's *Les Paravents (The Screens)* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Brook had already distinguished himself as a director with a series of works that began in 1945 with Cocteau's *Infernal Machine*, encompassed a repertoire of classical plays, a number of operas, films and TV dramas. The French Theatre of the Absurd made him discover, in the 1950s, a more poetic language of the theatre. In the early 1960s he came to realize that a more radical force of innovation was required to overcome the traditionalist attitudes that were prevalent in British theatre. This

new inspiration he found in Antonin Artaud, whose *Le Théâtre et son Double* had been translated into English in 1958. When Brook accepted to produce Genet's *Les Paravents*, he began to search for a group of actors he could train in an Artaudian method. This experimental company would be affiliated with the Royal Shakespeare Company and inject some fresh lifeblood into what had become a rather stale institution (or, as Marowitz put it, the Theatre of Cruelty group would be 'an anti-toxin which, after being injected into the bloodstream of the mother-company, would produce a greater robustness'¹³).

It fell to Charles Marowitz to audition some fifty 'actors who were open, adaptable, and ready to rush in where rigid pros fear to tread.'¹⁴ From these, a dozen were selected and thrown into a twelve-week workshop training designed to demolish 'the Stanislavski ethic' they had imbibed at drama school.¹⁵ The group used Artaud's concepts to explore ways of theatrical expression that were based on sounds and gestures rather than words and psychology. Thus, they sought to arrive at a novel form of theatrical communication designed to express repressed feelings and subconscious urges in a direct, unpredictable and intense manner (which, they hoped, would seize their audiences like Artaud's famous 'plague').

After two months they decided to show some of their work in progress to a largely professional audience at a small rehearsal room of the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts (LAMDA). Although it had been one of the conditions of this project that it did not have to result in a public performance, the group felt a need to communicate the fascinating results of their exercises to friends and colleagues. In January and February 1964, they presented, over a period of five weeks and under the banner of 'Theatre of Cruelty', a number of sound and movement exercises, improvisations, mimes, text collages and short scenes they had used in rehearsal. These included Artaud's *Spurt of Blood*; a dramatized short story by Alain Robbe-Grillet; two collages by Brook; three scenes from Genet's *The Screens*; John Arden's *Ars Longa, Vita Brevis*; short scenes by Ray Bradbury and Cyril Conolly; and a group-devised collage of *Hamlet*.¹⁶ To break the habit of repeating the same show for a succession of nights, Brook introduced 'free' improvisations, which he changed from day to day without giving much advance warning to the actors. Another section consisted of texts generated in the course of the day; for instance, Brook rehearsed a scene from *Richard III* or engaged in a spontaneous exchange with Marowitz on their motives for mounting this show. Marowitz devised new tasks and exercises, which he directed from the stage, swapping roles, altering texts, performing them in a mime fashion and so on. One scripted piece by Ableman was presented completely unrehearsed in a manner that depended on the spirit that moved the actors on the night. One

evening, John Arden was asked to come on stage and defend his play against one of the actors, who hated it.

An actor playing the role of Artaud introduced each performance. He presented himself for an audition, had to run around, jump on a chair, crawl on the floor, and so on, in a typically 'Artaudian' fashion, only to be turned down by the theatre manager because his performance was considered 'too realistic.'¹⁷ As far as *Le Jet de sang* was concerned, it was played by masked actors twice every evening, once using Artaud's text and once by means of sounds and images only. Each performance lasted three to five minutes. Clive Barker, who was an actor in Joan Littlewood's company at the time, complained about the 'placid, tasteful, meaningless 'theatre of illusion' representation that the play got at LAMDA.' As an example, he described how the scene with the Knight and Wet-nurse was staged:

The narrator gives the line: 'Enter a knight in medieval armour followed by a wet-nurse, her breasts in her hands.' The physical effort of a man in one of the suits of the Black Prince—ornate to the point of sensuality—followed by a big girl cupping in her hands a pair of great steaming tits, milk dribbling from the nipples, must be almost overwhelming in its immediacy and power. I can see this scene as I have described it. I can see it performed by a man in a polished steel breastplate draped in cold acid silks followed by a girl decorated with a pair of crudely painted bladders, filled with water. It might be obscene in execution but the ritual quality and association would stimulate me. What we saw was a man in standard Old Vic imitation armour followed by a girl, inexplicably in pseudo fourteenth costume, cupping her empty hands eighteen inches in front of her. The contradiction between words and images depressed me beyond words.¹⁸

Similarly, Michael Kustow felt that the presentation was too much akin to melodrama and had the stale smell of a 'parfum suranné.'¹⁹ Also Marowitz, in hindsight, was not sure about the Artaudian quality of the show. 'Where, in all of this, was Artaud?' he asked himself in 1966 and added as a defence: 'It was never our intention to create an Artaudian theatre ... What was Artaudian in our work was the search for means, other than naturalistic-linguistic means, of communication experience and insights.'²⁰

Brook was not the only director to attempt a staging of *Le Jet de sang*. Virmaux mentions a 1962 production by Jean-Marie Patte at the recently founded Université du Théâtre des Nations, one by René Goering (later to become director of the Festival de Radio-France) at an unnamed venue in 1964, one by the experimental company Teatro Esse in Naples (no date given²¹) and an amateur production in London in 1967.²² Since then, various other directors and theatre collectives

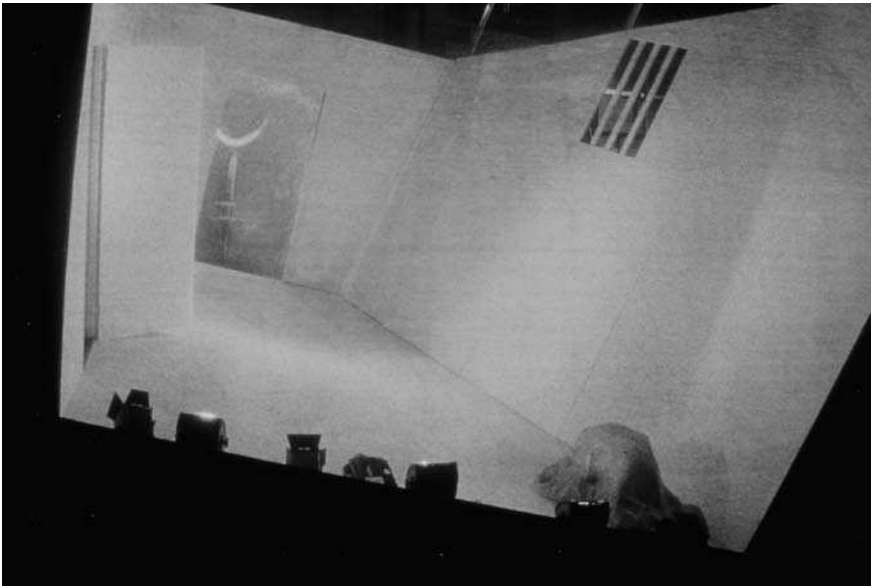


Set design for *Jet de Sang* (Bristol, 1996). Photo by Günter Berghaus

have followed their lead. Artaud's *Le Jet de sang* has, in recent years, met with a considerable interest among theatre practitioners. An internet investigation undertaken in January 2008 resulted in documents related to no less than 15 productions in 1996-2007 in countries as diverse as Italy, Spain, France, Poland, England, Australia, Canada, Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Brazil.

Jet de Sang in Bristol

When teaching seminars on Artaud or Surrealist theatre, I repeatedly had occasion to discuss *Le Jet de sang* with my students. In 1996, a group of students with whom I had previously worked on a Dada project convinced me that a production of *Le Jet de sang*, despite its reputation, could be contemplated. Our exploration of *Le Jet de sang* was to be centred on the theatrical ideas Artaud was confessing in the 1920s, but we also wanted to address some fundamental issues of modern theatre practice. One of the main purposes of our course was to explore the contradictions and tensions between the professional stage on the one hand, and radical non-conformism of performance art on the other. Thereby, this



**Fleeing perspectives of the set for *Jet de Sang* (Bristol, 1996).
Photo by Günter Berghaus**

course on surrealist theatre could arrive at more than just a study of a historical phenomenon. By addressing the questions the surrealists (or at least Artaud) had asked themselves about theatre but had failed to find a practical solution to, we were also mapping out a spectrum of possible approaches to contemporary theatre practice.

The Rehearsal Process

The conception of the set was to construct a miniature proscenium arch theatre in our studio and to offer the audience a peep-show, a view into a weird and wonderful world, where all perspectives were strangely distorted. The stage was unusually small, and vertiginously raked along two axes. (*See illustrations 1, 2, and 3.*) The proscenium opening was closed off with black gauze, which caused a strong soft-focus effect on the light emanating from the stage. The overall impression was that of a *theatrum mundi*, distanced yet very close, frightening but at the same time fascinating.

This monstrosity of a stage served the actors as a physical reminder that, when stepping onto these sloping boards, they were entering a world of theatre and make-believe. But more than that, it had the function of establishing a controlled ‘distortion of balance’, as Barba called it in *The Paper Canoe*.²³ Throwing the actors off their centre of balance was indeed a useful tool, we discovered, for enhancing their scenic presence and energy level. The unusual force lines compelled the actors into angular postures and movements. Thus, the fleeing perspectives of the set produced—as Artaud demanded—an ‘equivalent of vertigo in the mind or senses’²⁴ of our spectators (*see illustration 4*).

A first range of workshops was designed to dismantle our rationally determined attitudes to interpreting and understanding a playtext. Artaud (and before him other surrealists) had attempted to find channels of communication that bypass the rational mind. They called their technique of forging a ‘direct channel’ with the subconscious world ‘automatism.’ We explored the relationship between automatic writing and automatic acting, trying to discover where the latter differed from improvisation.

A second set of exercises in a-synchronous acting was more technical in nature. It was meant to effect an uncoupling of the usual correlation between words and actions. We fragmented gestures and movements, and then re-assembled them. We also considered how chance elements could be incorporated into the structure of the performances. However, in the end we dropped this idea since the

degree of uncertainty and risk was already so high that further unpredictabilities would have disconcerted the actors beyond an acceptable level.

Our work with Artaud's text only began seriously in the following phase. We started with an exploration of our personal responses to the play and sought to find ways of expressing the feelings and thoughts provoked by the playtext. *Le Jet de sang*—we discovered—triggered disturbing associations and brought long-forgotten memories back to life. Particularly useful were dream transcripts, written down in the morning after having gone to bed with a scene of the play as bedtime reading. The next day, in the rehearsal room, actors shared their hallucinations, dreams, and nightmares and used them as a springboard for improvisations and further explorations.

The varied experiences during these weeks were both exhilarating and deeply frustrating. Intense feelings of elation alternated with periods of depression, illness, truancy etc. Every person had a different threshold to cross and resistance to fight with. Nobody was obliged to justify his or her erratic and irritable behaviour, but we talked several times about the problems we were encountering in this project. There was one week, when I felt that we were seriously drifting into the domain of group therapy and that we would never come out of it with a product fit to be presented to a paying audience.

In this most dangerous, frightening, but also most liberating phase of our work the material of Artaud's scenario became fused with our own lives. We laid the foundation for a performance that was rooted in the personal world of the actors, and was not based on a rational textual exegesis. Having crossed this major threshold, the workshops rapidly transformed into rehearsals.

Shaping the Production

Before I return to the acting side of the production, a few words need to be said about the technical aspects of the show. In an essay of 1929, Artaud had confessed his 'interest in the Total Theatre formula' and his desire 'to bring back the old idea which, after all, was never put into effect, namely that of *integral theatre*.'²⁵

I mentioned before that we tried to apply the principle of fragmentation to every aspect of the show. Treating the scenic arts as autonomous and independent units with their own logic and aesthetics meant that each art, individually and separate from the others, had to offer a physical realization of the themes, images,

and archetypal actions contained in the playtext. We put particular emphasis on the abstract languages of light, sound and smell to explore the deeper levels of meaning in the play, and used the characteristics of each medium to make a specific contribution to the overall design of the production. Thereby we gave the performance a multilayered texture and a rich sensual appeal not commonly found in the theatre.

The latter was particularly true with regard to the *olfactory dimension* of our production. I wanted to use seven different smells, related to seven different scenes and seven different aspects of the play. Initially, we collaborated with a professor of Chemistry at Bristol University, and then with a major international fragrance company, who manufactured seven olfactory substances in line with our specifications and requirements. By activating the audience's sense of smell we were able to add an important dimension to their personal experience of the performance. Like abstract sounds (music), smells have a powerful, immediate and irrational effect on our emotional centre. Although smells are closely connected to memory, we are rarely able to analyse and explain our reactions to them. We certainly learned from this production how olfactory substances establish an intimate relationship between stage and auditorium and how altering the composition of this chemical atmosphere leads to subliminal responses, which can be orchestrated with the spectators' other emotional reactions to the stage events.

The *sound design* was conceived as a continuous soundtrack, which, in the first half, made use of conventional instrumental and vocal music, and in the second half of electronic compositions of an increasingly harrowing and piercing quality. Approximate timings of the scenic actions were taken during rehearsals, and on this basis the final mix of the soundtrack was completed. This, in turn, could be neatly fitted to the acting and serve as a rhythmic and structural skeleton of the performance.

Some actors feared that the precise timings of the soundtrack would turn the whole performance into a 'ballet' and would destroy the possibilities for improvisation and day-to-day changes during the run. To some degree, these objections were valid, because the performances did indeed look pretty similar from one night to the next. The production was one package and could be repeated for as long as one would muster the energy. However, the reason why I do not regard this feature of our production to be a mistake or an 'un-Artaudian' characteristic is that Artaud himself had a very similar working method. He sought to orchestrate the sound effects in a manner that they forced those actors to follow its rhythm with the precision of a perforated music roll in a pinola.²⁶ When Artaud was

given a chance to bring his production concepts to fruition, he could be very precise in his direction. He once said in a letter to Jean-Richard Bloch:

One should not judge me on the basis of the hurried and improvised performances of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, realized only with makeshift means. These performances did not indicate exactly my true intentions, nor did they reveal my technical and professional abilities as director.²⁷

For Artaud, the rôle of chance and of *trouvailles* was of major significance in the rehearsal process, but not during performances. Whenever production circumstances allowed him an extended rehearsal time, he employed this first of all for exploring the play, and then to fix the *trouvailles*. The Théâtre Alfred Jarry productions were not *designed* to be anarchical; Artaud worked, when he could, with precision. The actors were not asked to rely on chance and spontaneity, but to adhere to exact rhythmic structures, precise gestures and breathing patterns, and to imbue them with fresh energy on the night.

It is interesting that one of the actors in our production, who was initially most critical of the precise nature of our choreography and soundtrack, offered the most positive assessment of it in our post-mortem. He had discovered during the last performance an unknown freedom on stage: rather than having to permanently check his cues, movements, stage positions, etc. he could transcend the physical actions—which he carried out with total security—and reach a level of personal expression he had never experienced before. The detachment from the ‘machinery’ of acting allowed a performance of subjectivity that paradoxically acquired a new, objective dimension. The immensely personal presentation of a ‘character’ came akin to placing an archetype onstage. Here, the most personal became the most universal. One actor commented on this experience: ‘This transcendence of self during the moments of performance creates an emptiness. I am devoid of subject, I am object; I am not a character, I am a notion, an archetype. I approach hollowness like a marionette, a pure symbol of abstraction.’

The Performance

At the première, the different elements of the production fused together with quite startling results. We found that the sensuous impact of the various media undermined the audience’s attempts at deciphering in a rational manner the actions that were presented to them. I observed their reactions from various parts of the auditorium and found that after settling into the performance for some five to ten

minutes, most spectators gave in to their emotional responses. I have rarely seen audiences staring so intensely onto the stage and responding so jerkily to even slight sound or lighting changes. Reactions were markedly different from person to person, and quite a few people came back to see the production for a second time, probably in an attempt to make sense of their emotional responses.

The dramaturgy of emotions in our production was very clearly structured. It progressed from a sweet and beautiful beginning (lulling the spectators into a false sense of security and confirming preconceptions about surrealism derived from posters and record covers) to a harrowing and disgusting middle section and an unresolved yet uplifting ending. What people made of the play is difficult to say. To most of them it was, as they nearly all said, ‘an amazing experience.’ They found it disturbing to be confronted with a materialization of a dream, not an analysis of a dream. Confusion, irritation, frustration was the natural consequence for those spectators who wanted and needed to be given ‘meaning.’ Neither Artaud nor we as a company were willing to give in to this desire. The majority of the audience was able to accept this. What they saw and experienced was ‘halfway between reality and dreams’, to use an expression that Artaud coined in ‘*Le Songe de Strindberg fait partie*.’²⁸ It had an inherent, though unfathomable, logic that provoked deeply personal feelings. This is probably why people did not like to talk about the show immediately after leaving the theatre. In a rather unusual manner, some of them wrote letters to the cast and director, stating that *Jet de Sang*—and here I quote from some of these responses—‘was undoubtedly the strangest play I have ever seen, but it gave me an absolutely fascinating and mind-expanding time.’ ‘There were some beautiful images, but as a play to watch, and to smell, it felt like several seasons in hell.’

When editing the video, I observed that the supposedly ‘rigid’ skeleton provided by the soundtrack had in fact not at all produced identical performances. There were considerable variations in the movements, gestures, vocal delivery etc. Every sequence had a different energy level. Although the actors *felt* that they were doing the same moves and speaking the same text, they actually performed in a very different way each night. I presume that this is what Artaud had in mind when he spoke of theatre as ‘a true reality’²⁹ and ‘unrepeatable as any act of life.’³⁰

Seen from this perspective, *Le Jet de sang* would not qualify as theatre (which is always make-belief) nor, in fact, as ritual (which is a regularly repeated event). Poised between these two poles, *Le Jet de sang* presents a challenge to any troupe of actors seeking to give it scenic realization. But as our experience in Bristol showed, it is not an unperformable play. My hope is that other companies will jet-

tison the idea that Artaud advocated an ‘impossible theatre’ and will re-examine his challenging plays and concepts from the perspective of the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 The manuscript, dated 17 January 1925, is contained with two other texts (*Paul les oiseaux* and *La Vitre d’amour*) in a folder entitled *Trois Contes de Antonin Artaud*, preserved in the Jacques Doucet Library in Paris. See ARTAUD, Antonin, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, Gallimard, Paris, 1970, p. 386. It was published in a collection of surrealist texts by Artaud, *L’Ombilic des limbes*, Éditions de La Nouvelle Revue française, Paris, 1925.
- 2 See the chapter ‘Body Art, Ritualism and Neo-Shamanic Performances’ in: BERGHAUS, Günter, *Avant-garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005, pp. 132-178.
- 3 The piece was published in the journal *Intentions*, vol. 3, nos. 28-30, December 1924. For a detailed summary and a discussion of Artaud’s parodistic intentions see COHN, Ruby, ‘Artaud’s *Jet de Sang: Parody or Cruelty?*’, *Theater Journal*, 31 (1979), pp. 312-18, and BARANSKA, Ewa, ‘Deux Auteurs et deux pièces surréalistes: *La Boule de verre de Salacrou et Le Jet de sang* d’Artaud’, *Roczniki Humanistyczne*, 31, 5 (1983): 33-47.
- 4 The text has been lost. A reconstruction of the piece has been attempted by Robert Maguire in his thesis, *Hors-Théâtre*, Sorbonne, Paris, 1960. For a summary see VIRMAUX, Alain, *Antonin Artaud et le théâtre*, Seghers, Paris, 1970, pp. 319-20.
- 5 For two recent attempts see CROMBEZ, Thomas, ‘Artaud the Parodist? The Appropriations of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, 1927-1930’, *Forum Modernes Theater*, 20, 1 (2005), pp. 33-51 and JANNARONE, Kimberley, ‘The Theatre Before Its Double: Artaud Directs in the Alfred Jarry Theatre’, *Theatre Survey*, 46, 2 (November 2005), pp. 247-273.
- 6 PRÉVOST, Jean, ‘Victor ou les enfants au pouvoir, par Roger Vitrac, au Théâtre des Champs-Élysée’, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, 32, 185 (February 1929), p. 280.
- 7 See the excerpts from contemporary reviews in VIRMAUX, Alain, *Artaud: Un Bilan critique*, Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1979, pp. 27-40.
- 8 ARTAUD, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 46. Henceforth cited as OC.
- 9 DARNAULT, ‘La Création de ‘Victor’’, in: VIRMAUX, Alain, VIRMAUX, Odette, *Artaud vivant*, Nouvelles éditions Oswald, Paris, p. 194.
- 10 ARTAUD, ‘Manifeste pour un théâtre avorté’, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 23; *Collected Works*, transl. Victor Corti, Calder & Boyars, London, 1968-1974, vol. II, p. 23. Henceforth cited as CW.
- 11 See BERGHAUS, Günter, *Theatre, Performance and the Historical Avant-garde*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005, pp. 24-25.
- 12 Tania BALANCHOVA quoted in VIRMAUX, *Artaud vivant*, p. 58.

- ¹³ MAROWITZ, Charles, 'Notes on the Theatre of Cruelty', in: *The Tulane Drama Review*, 11, 2 (Winter 1966), pp. 152-172, here: p. 172.
- ¹⁴ MAROWITZ, *idem*, p. 153.
- ¹⁵ MAROWITZ, *idem*, 154.
- ¹⁶ See MAROWITZ, *idem*, and HUNT, Albert, REEVES, Geoffrey, *Peter Brook*, CUP, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 75-81.
- ¹⁷ HUNT & REEVES, *idem*, p. 76.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in HUNT & REEVES, *idem*, p. 77.
- ¹⁹ KUSTOW, Michael, 'Sur les traces d'Artaud', *Esprit*, NS 33, 5 (May 1965), p. 959.
- ²⁰ MAROWITZ, *idem*, p. 172.
- ²¹ This reference may, in fact, be a mistake. This important experimental theatre produced *I cenci*, translated and directed by Gennaro Vitiello, in December 1967.
- ²² VIRMAUX, *Antonin Artaud et le théâtre*, p. 245.
- ²³ BARBA, Eugenio, *The Paper Canoe*, transl. Richard Fowler, Routledge, London, 1995, ch. III.2: 'Balance in Action.'
- ²⁴ ARTAUD, 'Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry et l'hostilité public', in: OC II, p. 47; CW II, p. 41.
- ²⁵ ARTAUD, 'Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry (1929)', in: OC II, p. 33-34; CW II, p. 31.
- ²⁶ ARTAUD, 'Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry et l'hostilité public', in: OC II, p. 47; CW II, p. 41.
- ²⁷ Letter to Jean-Richard Bloch, 23 April 1931, in: OC V, p. 63.
- ²⁸ 'Le Songe de Strindberg fait partie', in: OC II, p. 79; CW II, p. 68.
- ²⁹ 'Le Théâtre Alfred Jarry', in: OC II, p. 11; CW II, p. 15 (translating 'réalité véritable' as 'indeed a reality').
- ³⁰ 'Théâtre Alfred Jarry: première année – Saison 1926-27', in OC II, p. 16; CW II, p. 18.

ARTAUD AND FABRE

Luk VAN DEN DRIES

Abstract

On many occasions, Jan Fabre expressed his indebtedness to the life and work of Antonin Artaud. One of his most clearly Artaud-influenced works is his theatre play 'A Tribe Is What I Am' (2004), which draws inspiration from Artaud's collection of surrealist texts, 'L'Ombilic des Limbes' (1925). This essay attempts to map the deeper layer in the nexus connecting Fabre and Artaud.

Introduction

Drawing the line from Antonin Artaud and ritualism to Jan Fabre is not very difficult. It is almost self-evident. There are several reasons for this. In the first place Artaud himself, and his mythical status in theatrical discourse and reflection. At its most general and basic level, theatrical discourse has its roots in the codex of tragedy that Aristotle lay down in his *Poetics*. It is known that the Greek philosopher did not look favorably on the theatrical spectacles of his own time and wanted to return to the primal force of tragedy as he found it in the older tragedians, such as Aeschylus and Sophocles (both of whom lived half a century before him).

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.¹

For Aristotle, language and action were the constituent elements of tragedy that, properly dosed, could effect a purification of the audience (*catharsis*). The idea of theatre as a linguistic event and as a representation of life and reality had a thorough and lasting influence on the history of theatre during the following centuries. Even Brecht, who presented himself as the Einstein of the stage, did not escape Aristotle.² Although he designated as 'anti-Aristotelian' his transformation of action into fable and of narrative causality into abrupt and a-linear montage, still he adheres to language and action as the constitutive elements of theatre. In

his book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann has written some passages on this topic which are worthy of consideration.³

Yet in contrast to the theatre of language and action, there has always existed a different definition of theatricality. It is not different in the sense of radically strange or diametrically opposed to the former. The other definition is not the negative of the dramatic positive. Amongst the origins of tragedy itself, there is a genetic strain to be found that goes back to the Dionysiac cults, centered around rituals of a markedly physical and ecstatic nature that were originally reserved for women.

The unknown nature of these rituals, and the potential for intoxication they contained, have always held up a mirror to the theatre of speech and action. It was as a ghost that survived in and through tragedy. In that ghost, the second definition of theatre was fixated with all characteristics that usually typify the Other in a phantasmatic way: fuller, deeper, more authentic, more satisfying, and so on. Often, it also fulfilled an antithetical function: physical instead of linguistic, irrational rather than rational, associative instead of logical.

In the twentieth century Artaud revealed himself as the spokesman of that ghost in theatre history. His writings on the Theatre of Cruelty, in which he expelled the linguistic action from the core of theatre, and designated the vacant space to images and to screams, had a significant shock effect – not on the contemporaries of Artaud but mainly on theatre as it was to develop in the decades after Artaud.

At first, during the fifties, only a few theatre artists had heard of Artaud. His influence slowly grew. In Flanders, for example, dramatist-directors such as Hugo Claus and Tone Brulin were strongly influenced by Artaud. But from the sixties onwards the impact of Artaud became massive. Artaud was seen as a messiah of modern theatre who would save it from the stranglehold of language. Anyone who produced experimental theatre worshipped Artaud. His name became the call sign as well as the provider of credentials for any alternative or fringe theatre project. Artaud became a fig leaf that had to cover all kinds of ritualistic, physical, visual, associative, irrational, or environmental theatre.

However, his name was quickly transformed into a giant, stretched and worn-out fig leaf for everything presenting itself as an alternative to the theatre of language and action. In that sense, considering the work of Fabre as a continuation of Artaud is not so difficult. The post-Artaud era has itself become an equally

rhizomatic as elusive construct on which the name of Artaud has to bestow the legitimacy of something that is beyond tragedy's law. One could consider Artaud therefore as the legitimation of the ghost in tragedy.

The Topos of Pain

The relationship between Artaud and Fabre is situated on a deeper level. In what follows I will try to sketch the lines connecting the two oeuvres.

A first meeting point is obviously the topos of pain. Pain is central to Fabre's oeuvre, but the meaning and function of pain in his work shift. It was already the case in the period of his first performances, when he produced (and performed) extremely long works that required great endurance. In his early theatre works pain radiates through all pores of the productions. *It Is Theatre As to Be Expected and Foreseen* (1982) introduces endless repetition as the main instrument of pain. For example, it featured a scene in which two actors tried to pull each other up by their hair, or another in which a dancer incessantly falls to the floor, again and again, in an endless loop. In *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984), too, the pain of repetition has the role of introducing physical reality into the context of theatrical fiction. In the *Pietà* scene, four knights perform a last salute to their fallen loved one. They then repeat the action again and again, until their muscles begin to shake and they break a sweat. The carefully composed picture starts to crack. Actual time attacks the theatrical fiction. Not coincidentally, the keywords of the performance read: 'Real pain. Real action.'

In recent work, pain is present in a different way. Fabre intends to sketch the condition of man and the causes of his existential pain through productions such as *As Long As the World Needs a Warrior's Soul* (2000), *Je suis sang* (2001), and *L'Histoire des Larmes* (2005). Fabre views life as an organic cycle of birth and death where the pain of being born and dying has a natural place. But there is also something one could call the cultural-historical pain. It is strongly associated with the alienation of the body that affects us through a double tradition: the Judeo-Christian denial of the body, and the excessive rationalism of the Enlightenment.

In *Je suis sang*, images of torture dominate the stage. A human figure is hung upside down and set about with a knife. Bodies are treated as hunks of meat, deported in trays. Castrations are frequent. Swords thirst for blood, no longer under control, and will-less knights find themselves glued to the hilts. There is an abundance of wounds. The brides show their wounds, their bodies mutilated. Martyrs show their

wounds, Sebastian has countless arrows in his body. The performers also wound themselves, all the veins are cut, vein after vein, each one is named and described, just as in an anatomy lesson. But there are also massive stigmata of the past. Old wounds, such as the Catholic scars, that have defined our culture and have alienated us from the blood, from the mystery of fertility, from death. All these wounds are opened up in *Je suis sang*. It is a fountain of blood. Until death unites us again.

In *L'Histoire des Larmes* the dominant images show the world as a desert, and life as a long journey into arid land. They symbolize the litany of despair that marks life. The primary material in this piece is glass, a hard and numb substance. As happens frequently in fairy tales, the production shows tears being transformed into solidified matter. They are the traces of sorrow, to be carried around as in a funeral procession. Fabre portrays life as a pilgrimage of tears. Man is born and he cries. He was baptized and he cries. With his first breath he blows tears. And in those tears he will dress himself. As in a fairy tale, the tears always take another shape, each one of which illustrates a phase of the long journey to death. At the heart of that journey is despair. In a key scene, we see figures that metamorphose into pearls of grief on a bed of sorrows. They form an impressive tableau into which all suffering from (art) history has been condensed.

In his work, Fabre employs pain as a central metaphor to discuss the human condition. Moreover, pain is also used as an instrument to push the boundaries of his performers' bodies and so to demonstrate the freedom that lies beyond pain. Pain thus acquires a positive value, when it is aimed at 'pushing back my own physical and mental boundaries'.

Destruction then becomes a way to reach a state of being where I can do without the safety net of experience and knowledge so that I don't feel any physical pain anymore and go into a kind of mental intoxication that takes away my awareness of time.⁴

In the life and work of Artaud, pain occupies the center of the stage. It is known that Artaud was tormented by intense physical and psychological pain (the consequences, probably, of the meningitis he survived at the age of five) and addicted to narcotics, to which he was introduced as an adolescent precisely to treat his condition. After his trips to Mexico and Ireland and two detoxification programs he was confined to various asylums, first in Dublin, then in Le Havre, Rouen, and finally Paris, where he was moved to a different institution for three times. The first internment report states: 'attacks of mental disorders in the form of delusions with neurotic characteristics: claims that he is served poisoned food, and is administered poison gas; subject to hallucinations; dangerous to himself

and his environment.' In the hospital of Saint-Anne the initial diagnosis details 'delusions of being chased by his mother, by the police, and by Vishnu-adherents. Toxicomania since the age of five (heroin, cocaine, laudanum). Literary pretensions might be permitted to the extent that his madness serves to inspire him.' After those seven years of imprisonment, of which three in isolation, he furiously and incessantly curses psychiatry in his writings.

The Theatre of Cruelty

In Artaud's life, pain was not a life-threatening element, but rather a formative element. Famous is his statement that: 'J'ai été malade toute ma vie et je ne demande qu'à continuer.'⁵ For Artaud, man creates the form of his own life, which he may recreate according to his own and strictly individual understanding. That is the only way to acquire freedom. He must therefore detach himself from creation as well as from society, and create his own revolution. Not in a socio-political sense, as Artaud believed any social-political system is essentially repressive. It is rather a re-creation at the physical level: the liberation of the bodies and finding one's own face. That road to salvation and freedom can only be associated with pain and rage. Artaud wants to foster the commitment to a new body:

Who am I
 where do I come from
 I am Antonin Artaud
 and I say it
 as only I know how to
 and you will see my real body
 bursting into fragments
 collected
 under 10,000 notorious looks
 as a new body
 which you'll never be able to forget
 for it's me
 the Man
 who will be judge
 in the final reckoning
 it's to me
 that all the elements
 of body and things
 will come to be referred
 it's the state of my
 body will shape
 the Last Judgement...⁶

This new body is a body purified from organs and from sexuality. Everything is functional: 'I will be chaste and pure, pristine, untouched, untouchable.'⁷ The body has reached a kind of transcendence, but not in the Christian sense. The body is not renounced, or tamed, or constricted, or eradicated through asceticism. The idea is to find the original body. Artaud calls this the 'tree-body,' or the 'old warrior'. A key aspect of this body image is that it is subject to very different forces. It is torn by conflicting impulses, it is a field of energies on which each of them impose their will. Artaud's concept of a pure body is actually the opposite of a purified body, not the body that gets rid of its physicality and so becomes pure 'spirit', but rather the body in its most pure and material form. As Minne Buwalda, the editor and translator of a Dutch Artaud anthology, puts it:

The only thing he possesses is this one body that covers everything there is in his existence. It is a force field of contradictions, and man must exploit this potential on the level of willpower and self-determination, a level that is already immanently present in the body itself.⁸

This purely physical body can only be achieved through pain and suffering, a process of disintegration and disruption, in order to re-build oneself in a form of total wholeness. This process of tearing oneself apart is a very active process. Man must undertake his own descent into the body's hell; he must yield to his own pain, and actively search for it in order to arrive at liberty and at a pure body.

This process requires a high degree of personal cruelty. In theatre Artaud detected the possibility of making that individual process into a public event. Theatre was the place for Artaud to shape the tension between that pure body and the cosmic menace. I personally favor Artaud's statement that 'We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads. And above all else, theatre is made to teach us this.'⁹ It introduces the utopian aspect under which he strove to place theatre, not as a place for entertainment, but for understanding and confrontation. That way he wanted to restore theatre's former religious function. Artaud writes quite confusedly about how that religious context is to be understood. He often refers to various occult disciplines such as alchemy and the Kabbalah; he repeatedly and vehemently renounces Christianity and yet it remains an important point of reference in his writings; and during his visit to the tribe of the Tarahumaras in Mexico he will witness of his encounter with the god Ciguri after consuming peyote (a cactus containing psychoactive substances such as mescaline). The sky that could fall on our heads is thus populated with diverse metaphysical powers, but more important is the personal battle, the quest of the human individual in a world of chaos, mass, and matter.

Affective Athleticism

The theatre is able to show something of that chaos, that cruelty, and that magic. Artaud devised a fairly elaborate theory expressing this insight in his two manifestos on the Theatre of Cruelty (but also in many other texts). I would like to quote from the second manifesto:

By eliminating the stage, shows made up and constructed in this manner will extend over the whole auditorium and will scale the walls from the ground up along slender catwalks, physically enveloping the audience, constantly immersing them in light, imagery, movements and sound. The set will consist of the characters themselves, grown as tall as gigantic puppets, landscapes of moving lights playing on objects, or continually shifting masks.¹⁰

More important than these visions, especially in comparison to Fabre, is Artaud's belief in the importance of a sign language. One of his deeply held convictions was the belief that an alternative language existed, i.e., a language of iconic characters and ancient symbols, originating from the numerological or kabbalistic systems he studied continuously. In his travelogue of the Tarahumaras there are descriptions of the symbols that he discovered in the landscape and rock formations, in groups of trees, in positions of stones and how they marked the position of the sun. There he also refers to insights of Jewish mysticism, Rosicrucianism, and various other doctrines.

He believed to have stumbled upon a universal language, a secret alphabet that speaks with a fullness and a magical force to anyone who is open to it. A language infinitely more powerful than those produced by the glottis. It was the same magical effect he found in the Balinese dancers, whose coded body language he connected to an archetypal symbolism. According to Artaud, this sign language has a direct effect on the body. He therefore attached great importance to the actor. The actor he called an athlete of the affections, someone who is able to express the vibrations of the soul and the vibrations of the passions very precisely and powerfully. What it definitely should not be is the sentimentality that was all too present on the French stage of his day. Artaud instead aims to produce the material form of the affective vibrations:

To arrive at the emotions through their powers instead of regarding them as pure extraction, confers a mastery on an actor equal to a true healer's.¹¹

To Make Myself

Let us return to Fabre and see how these basic concepts of Artaud influenced his work. Many of the analogies with Artaud may be found in the text entitled 'A Tribe Is What I Am,' written at the invitation of Muziektheater Transparant for the production *Men in Tribulation* of 2004 (dedicated to Artaud, and directed by Eric Sleichim). Fabre was mainly inspired by the texts of Artaud's collection *L'Ombilic des Limbes (Umbilical Limbo)*. In these texts, a series of images of the body is frequently re-worked: the image of a fatally tired man plagued by delirious fears; the image of a body in pain ('Description of a Physical State'); the argument for the free use of drugs ('Letter to the Legislator of the Drug Act'); the peeling of the soul as a central motif.

More important, however, than Fabre's literal echoes of Artaud, is the movement of his text: a plea for the benefits of pain and disease, a plea for the re-creation of man, a quest for freedom, for the liberation of God in the divine, and finally the desire 'to explore other sources / and to enter in contact with / a new reality / To allow / meetings of a more subtle and rare nature.'¹² It is the same desire for wholeness, for physical and mental re-creation which permeated the work of Artaud: 'I now only have one task, to make myself.'¹³ Fabre's 'A Tribe Is What I Am' ends with the famous statement of Artaud in his letter to André Breton, 'La vraie révolution sera mentale ou ne sera pas.'¹⁴ This is also clearly connected to the citation from Fabre (cf. supra) on the mental intoxication that is generated beyond the pain.

The images that Fabre evokes in his many performances are always focused on the search for violence, lust, and cruelty in the Artaudian sense. He mainly strives to loosen man from his already formed and safe structure, and make him confront the chaos, the unformed, the material, in order to allow him to transform himself. Fabre evokes the ideal of the angel, an in-between creature in which all differences are eliminated (*Angel of Death*, 1996). There is also the wish to disappear into another body at the point where the ego dissolves into a state of being-no-longer, into the anonymity of androgyny (*Quando l'uomo principale è una donna*, 2004). There is the search for the future body as a beam of intensities, a body without organs that transgresses the borders of its own territory and doesn't let itself be restrained by its own skeleton or accidental flesh, as in the piece *Etant donnés* (2004), in which the main character at the end appears to have exploded, just as in Artaud's poem (see above). Always the power of metamorphosis takes the center of the stage, as in *As Long As the World Needs a Warrior's Soul*, where the human figures are subject to continuous change: between man and animal, human and

object, gender or form. By re-creating themselves, they constantly transgress their physical boundaries.

Fabre evokes insights about acting and sign language that lie close to Artaud: his actors are the warriors of beauty who need to search for an affective athleticism:

What I'm really trying to achieve with my actors and dancers, is to teach them how to use their freedom to discover their own personal cruelty. It's all about opening up a new spectrum of emotional boundaries and daring to extend them. Having the nerve to enter into the darkest rooms of your own mind and using them.¹⁵

Fabre often uses the image of alchemy: an ignited body in a state of ecstasy that demonstrates what Artaud has called a 'pure body.' The chaos that Fabre evokes is, however, staged very strictly. He examines the explosiveness of body and image by translating it into a coded sign language. Fabre employs a symbolic language of his own (including items such as dinner plates, medieval armor, swords) but mainly works with the kinetics of the body. Fabre is probably one of the directors in Flanders who goes furthest in disciplining the body. Above all, Fabre has an eye for the qualities and the individuality of each body. It is just that which he will dig up: minor details such as the shape of a spine, the pigment of the skin, the length of one limb. Those details he will knead, deform, and massage until the correct kinetics is formed. Such careful precision is related to how Artaud imagined the language of the body.

Learning through Suffering

The power of the voice, its rhythm, its modulations, its cries have already been intensely explored by Fabre. And certainly the possibility of the scream to penetrate the body immediately. Fabre often works with the irritation that the voice can bring about, for example, during the opening scene of *L'Histoire des Larmes*. But the most vocal experiments related to Artaud were tested by Fabre in a staging of *Prometheus Landschaft* (1988). The language was completely emaciated, the choirs were reduced to stuttering sounds 'as if each word was a wound.' Speaking thus became a physical action; speech was a form of vomiting. Like Artaud, Fabre was here searching for the efficacy of language beyond comprehension.

Artaud and Fabre consider themselves as a kind of shaman, and the theatre as an instrument of healing. Fabre thereby returns to the ancient theory of catharsis,

which he further elaborates through his experiences with performance art. He wants his actors and the audience to learn through suffering. And so we have at last returned to Aristotle.

(Translated by T. Crombez)

Notes

- 1 ARISTOTLE, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, transl. S.H. Butcher (orig. 1894, St. Martin's Press), introd. J. Gassner. Dover, New York, 1951, p. 29/ch. VI, 1450b19.
- 2 LEHMANN, Hans-Thies, *Postdramatisches Theater*, Verlag der Autoren, Frankfurt am Main, 1999, p. 47.
- 3 LEHMANN, idem, p. 47-48.
- 4 Jan Fabre quoted in VAN DEN DRIES, Luk, *Corpus Jan Fabre: Observations of a creative process*, Imschoot, Gent, 2006, p. 324.
- 5 ARTAUD, Antonin, 'Les Malades et les médecins', in: *Cahiers du retour à Paris (26 mai-juillet 1946)*, *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976- , vol. XXII, p. 67.
- 6 ARTAUD, Antonin, *A Second Artaud Anthology*, transl. Jack Hirschman, in: *Invisible City*, nr. 6, San Francisco, 1972.
- 7 ARTAUD, Antonin, 'Je hais et abjecte en lâche' (1947), in: 84, nr. 8-9, 1949, p. 283.
- 8 ARTAUD, Antonin, *Dans om de anatomie*, transl. Minne Buwalda, Perdu, Amsterdam, 1989, p. 67.
- 9 ARTAUD, Antonin, *Collected Works*, transl. Victor Corti, Calder & Boyars, London, 1968-1974, vol. IV, p. 60. Henceforth cited as CW.
- 10 CW, vol. IV, p. 97.
- 11 ARTAUD, 'An Affective Athleticism', in: CW, vol. IV, p. 102.
- 12 FABRE, Jan, *Ik ben een fout: Theaterscripts en theaterteksten (1975-2004)*, Meulenhoff/Manteau, Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 2004, p. 663. (Translation: LVdD)
- 13 ARTAUD, *Nerve-Scales*, in: CW, vol. I, p. 74.
- 14 Artaud quoted in FABRE, *ibid.*
- 15 VAN DEN DRIES, *idem*, p. 327.



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *As Long as the World Needs a Warrior's Soul* (2000).
Performers (in the middle): Cedric Charron & Saskia Hoffmann.
Photo by Marc Ginot**



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *As Long as the World Needs a Warrior's Soul* (2000).
Performer: Erna Omarsdottir. Photo by Ilke Christiaens**



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *As Long as the World Needs a Warrior's Soul* (2000).
Performer: Cedric Charron. Photo by Malou Swinnen**



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *Je suis sang (conte de fées médiéval)* (2001).
Performers: Geert Vaes (front), Heike Langsdorf, Cedric Charron,
Ivana Jozic. Photo by Wonge Bergmann**

‘I DID TAKE THE ROLE OF THE SHAMAN ...’ THE ARTISTIC RITUALS OF JOSEPH BEUYS

Barbara GRONAU

Abstract

The relationship between the notion of ritual and the work of the German artist Joseph Beuys seems self-evident and questionable at the same time. In this essay, a reflection on the notions of ritual and of theatre/performance art will be followed by a description of the ritualistic allusions in Beuys’ work. As an example of ‘artistic rituals’ I discuss Beuys’ performance Celtic +~ which took place in Basel (Switzerland) in 1971.

Thinking about the German artist Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) and the notion of ritual brings up a paradoxical situation. On the one hand there seems to be a strong connection. Beuys—allegedly rescued by native Tartarians after an air crash in the Second World War—can be seen as the artist who tried to work out a holistic concept of art and life in answer to the crisis that Europe, and particularly Germany, faced after 1945. To this effect he studied Asian worldviews, Celtic myths, and Christian symbols. The concept of ritual appeared both in his reading and in titles for drawings or objects. It also was an obvious model for his performances, where he played with the attitude of the shaman. Hence, many spectators described their experience of Beuys’ works in ritualistic terms, or in terms of a ‘rite of passage’.

On the other hand, Beuys’ concept of art met with harsh criticism from conservative politicians, left-wing art-critics, and well-known colleagues. Especially the American art-historian Benjamin Buchloh elaborately criticized Beuys’ idea of the artist as a leader, pointing out that the artist sees himself as a ‘privileged being, a seer that provides higher forms of transhistorical knowledge to an audience, that is in deep dependence and need of epiphanic revelations.’¹

Once again, the case of Joseph Beuys seems to bring up the question of art and ritual in a broader sense. What are the reasons to look for rituals as sources for modern performances? To what extent does the notion of ritual influence the image of post-war artists? And how can we describe art forms that are meant to cross the border of theatrical representation through ritualistic practices?

Correspondences and Differences

As recent publications have shown, there is a wide range of definitions to describe and explain rituals.² They can be seen as ‘processes of embodiment’³, as ‘symbolic actions,’⁴ or as ‘cultural performances.’⁵ These divergent concepts overlap in at least two points: rituals are transformative actions, based on traditional patterns.

As transformative actions, rituals generate a natural or social transformation or change. Arnold van Gennep showed in his description of ceremonies surrounding birth, death, and marriage that such rites change the social role and the status of a subject. Even while rituals are cultural mechanisms to overcome a difficulty or a crisis, they do not merely have a stabilizing function. They can unfold transgressive energies and violent conflicts, by triggering a state of ‘liminality’, i.e., a zone of ‘betwixt and between.’⁶

Rituals follow traditional patterns of action, which have to be reiterated in every performance. As modern theories pointed out, these repetitions are always reinventions of a fixed scheme, which can vary to a certain degree. The ludic and playful elements of rituals may include various materials, sounds, gestures, actions, and linguistic signs.

Therefore ritual and theatre have a lot in common. Both are cultural performances, which are linked to the presence of human bodies. In both cases people are taking up certain roles and following a *mise-en-scène*. Both can trigger individual or collective effects.

But while rituals need to be done by authorized persons and in a traditional setting, theatrical performances are open to artistic shifts and different interpretations. In that sense, the performative quality of a ritual differs from that of a theatrical play. While the wedding ceremony in a Christian church (effected by a priest) changes the status of a man and a woman into a couple, the same ceremony played on a theatre stage could not generate a new social reality.

When we look at the history of performance art, it is interesting to note that the theatrical allusions to ritual at the beginning of the twentieth century (as we find in the works of Antonin Artaud, Georg Fuchs, or the Ballets Russes) are inspired by an interest in the ritual’s performative quality. Throughout a ‘ritualization’ of theatre (as Richard Schechner called it) the performance should transform the audience into a community and open it up to spiritual energies. When, during the sixties,

the idea of ritualization re-entered the field of modern art, it was derived from two sources: the artistic desire for strong sensory experiences beyond the domain of traditional art, and the lack of a suitable terminology for the new art forms.

It is remarkable that an artist like Allan Kaprow, commonly known as the 'inventor' of an art form called 'Happening', tried to define it using ritualistic terms. He argued:

Happenings, freed from the restrictions of conventional art materials, have discovered the world at their fingertips, and the intentional results are *quasi-rituals*, never to be repeated.⁷

As much as the idea of an unrepeatable ritual is an oxymoron, Kaprow's Happenings do have affinities with cultural performances such as 'parades, carnivals, games, expeditions ... and secular rituals.'⁸

While Kaprow uses the term 'ritual' or 'quasi-ritual' to describe a formal structure of performance which will no longer be 'staged theatre', his European colleague Joseph Beuys seems to justify the notion of ritual in a different way. Beuys' work appears to be inspired by various mythological traditions, by symbolic elements, and by the idea of shamanism.

Ritualistic Elements in the Actions of Beuys

Beuys rarely uses the term 'ritual' to designate his own work. But his theoretical writings and his art works are full of elements that we know from a ritualistic context. I would like to point at five distinct elements.

- (1) *Mythology*: The Celtic mythology remained an inspiration throughout Beuys' life. It is very prominent in the idea of 'Eurasia' (the name of several performances, films, and objects) as a combination of European and Asian spirituality. By working with a coyote in New York in 1974, on the occasion of the performance entitled *Coyote: I like America, and America likes me*, the artist also tried to bring in the narratives of the Native Americans. Beuys combined these mythological traditions with his own private mythology, in which the crash of his airplane during the Second World War introduced him to the way of life and the culture of the nomadic Tartarians (close to the Mongolian border).
- (2) *Christianity*: The Christian iconography can be seen as another source for the artist's work. He reinterpreted the symbol of the cross by reshaping, splitting

and transposing its beams. Beuys' idea of what he calls the 'Christusimpuls' as an inspirational power which realizes itself through the act of suffering can be seen as a desire to transcend human nature. As we will see later, we can find symbolic actions—like baptism and the washing of feet—as formal elements in his performances.

- (3) *Animality*: One of the very early distinctions between the Fluxus movement and Beuys (who is strongly connected to Fluxus during the sixties) concerns his use of dead or living animals. In the performance *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt* of 1965 (*How to explain pictures to a dead hare*), Beuys was sitting in a gallery with a golden layer of make-up on his head, speaking incomprehensible words to a dead hare on his lap. In the same vein, the living animal from *Coyote* was also supposed to function as a bridge to the forgotten spiritual realm of early America. Lastly, Beuys frequently made use of bones from dead rats, hares, or cows in order to connect to shamanistic rituals, in which remains of animals often play a central role.
- (4) *Transformation*: As much as transformation is the aim of a ritual, it also applies to the artist's work. Transformation means to transfigure objects or actions by revealing their inner energies. Therefore Beuys often employed organic materials (fat, felt, blood, or eggs) that are transformed during the process of decay. Transformation equally refers to changing the spectator or the audience, who should reach a higher state of mind by means of the aesthetic experience. As much as Beuys wanted to trigger an evolutionary process, his notion of 'development' has always been understood as a transformation to higher states of consciousness and existence.
- (5) *Habit*: Finally, there is the idea of Beuys as a leading figure, a 'Hirschführer' (literally: deer leader) or a shaman. Here it becomes evident that the artist functions as a medium, a connection to the transcendent levels of reality. Beuys embodied that role by wearing special clothing (a fur coat, his hat, his waistcoat), which is not merely a costume, but also functions as everyday clothing. It can be seen as a way of self-fashioning (a term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt): the creation of a self according to different visual and vestimental standards.

In Beuys' own words, the allusion to shamanistic fashioning and practice gives the possibility to overcome the dissociated world of now:

I did take the role of the shaman. But not in the sense of pointing backwards, in the sense of 'we have to go back', but to express something futuristic/utopian. The shaman symbolises someone who brings materialistic and spiritual relations into a unity.⁹

Taking ancient elements to achieve an utopian state—as Beuys’ words suggest here—is characteristic for the re-theatricalization or re-ritualization the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde promoted.¹⁰ Achieving a collective and artistic unity—as the idea of a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ suggests—can only be reached by acts of transgression. In this sense, taking the role of a shaman seems to enable the artist to function as a medium between here and there, the perceivable material world and its hidden spiritual forces. Beuys’ interest in transgressive actions is always motivated by the search for an ‘anthropological art’, or an ‘organic society’.¹¹ He tries to initiate a ‘healing process’.

Critics of these ideas should be aware that a certain distance remains between the performer (artist) and his role (shaman), and between an artistic performance and a true ritual. As Gabriele Brandstetter claimed for Strawinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps*, reading the performances strictly as a ritual would not justify their complexity, because ‘it is not a mise-en-scène of a ritual but rather (...) the staging of a portrayed ritual’.¹²

In order to reveal some of the aesthetic strategies and effects in Beuys’ artistic rituals, I would like to discuss his performance *Celtic +~~~*, which took place in Basl (Switzerland) in 1971.

Celtic +~~~

In April 1971, Beuys executed a performance named *Celtic +~~~* in Basl. The so-called ‘action’ lasted about seven hours and was performed in an air-raid shelter under construction. At that time, the German artist was already quite famous, and so the bare space at the periphery of Basl was temporarily filled with more than 700 people.

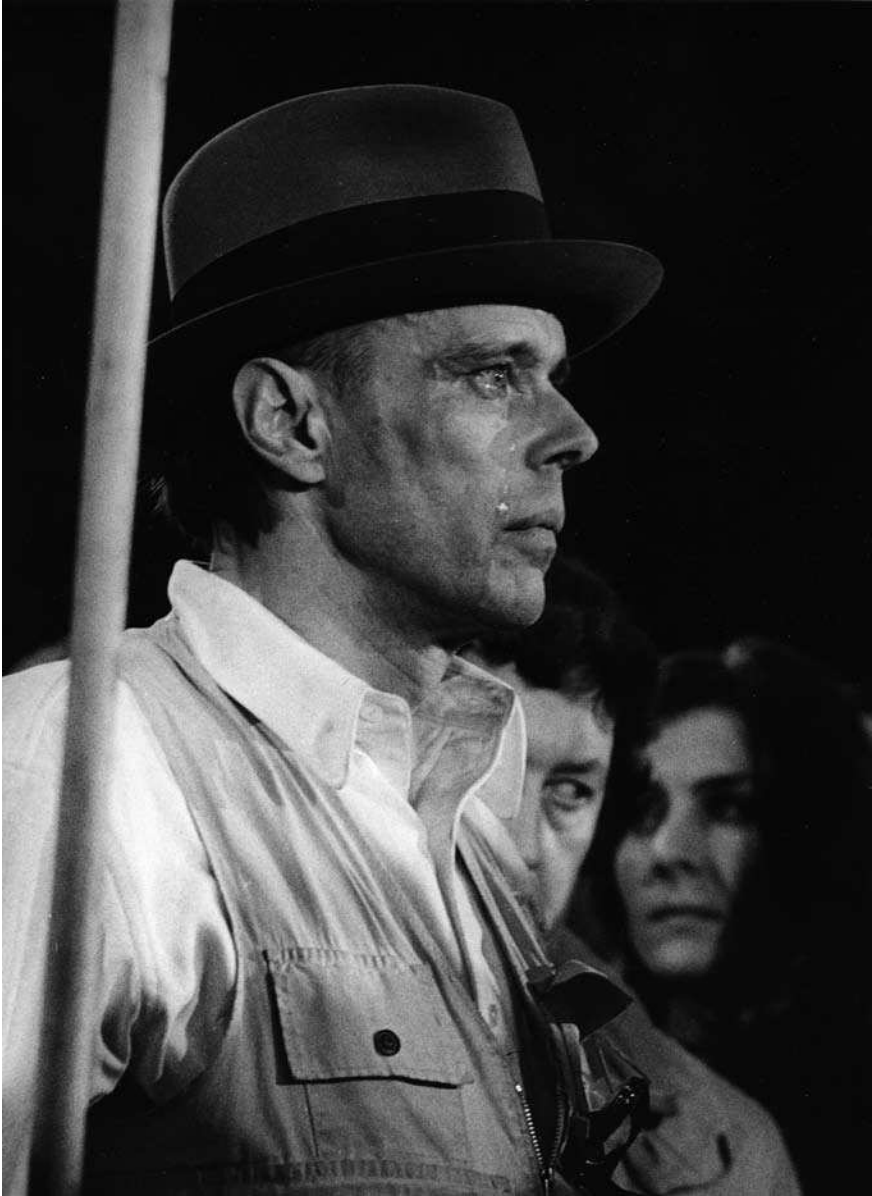
During the entire performance, music by the Danish Fluxus composer Henning Christiansen was played. I would like to give a short impression of the performance, which is entirely based on filmed documentaries, photographs, and the book on Beuys’ performances by Uwe Schneede.¹³ During most of the performance Beuys moved right through the audience, executing several actions involving various objects and instruments. He started by washing the feet of seven people, then drew symbols and letters on a blackboard he showed to the audience. He pushed his way through the crowd by slipping the blackboard on the ground.



**Joseph Beuys, *Celtic +~~~* (Basl, 1971). Beuys acting in the crowd.
Photo by Kurt Wyss, Basl**

Then four of Beuys' experimental movies, in which former performances and landscapes were shown, were projected on the concrete walls of the shelter. For more than one hour, Beuys collected small pieces of gelatine from the walls, which he had prepared before, while climbing up a stair and balancing a big plate on his shoulder. After spilling all of the gelatine over his body, he made 'öö'-noises into a microphone, a sound reminding of the bell of a deer. At this time the action had already lasted for six hours, and many of the curious audience members had gone home. Then the artist stood still for about an hour. Holding a tall wooden stick in his right hand, he remained silent, surrounded by some one hundred people in the centre of the shelter. While monotone sounds filled the air, the audience seemed to meditate together with the performer. Suddenly tears ran out of Beuys' eyes—not accounted for by any action of the performer. He finished the performance by kneeling down in a tub, and posing in a gesture of prayer. Henning Christiansen was pouring water over him. Beuys stood up, laughed, and said 'finish'.

I would now like to investigate two aspects of *Celtic +~~~* that relate specifically to its ritualistic dimension, namely, the performance's frame of reference and the different roles the performer takes on.



Joseph Beuys, *Celtic +~~~* (Basel, 1971). Performing a tableau vivant.
Photo by Kurt Wyss, Basl



Joseph Beuys, *Celtic +~~~* (Basel, 1971). Unpredicted interventions.
Photo: Kurt Wyss, Basl

(1) *Framing*. The footwashing scene at the beginning and the baptism scene at the end set the action in a ritual frame. This assumption is supported by the fact that *Celtic +~~~~* took place in the week before Easter. One may suppose that the attentive Basl population recognized the washing of feet and the baptism in the tub as Christian ritual elements. Because Beuys claimed that his action constituted ‘eine tiefgreifende Transformation, Metamorphose (...) eine Umwandlung des Begriffes [der Kunst] selbst,’¹⁴ it has been said that *Celtic +~~~~* is itself an initiation ritual.¹⁵ The place of the initiated would then be taken by the concept of art—which cannot exist without a conscious mind thinking of it—or rather by the participants themselves, who have been invited throughout the action to transform the concept of art into a more ‘anthropological’ notion.

Nonetheless, Beuys’ action is not a ritual, because the different action sequences are performed within the framework of an artistic event, which may quote rituals and refer to their meanings and structures, but cannot effect the change of status which is an essential part of ritual as a cultural performance. Ritualistic moments only function within this action as *quotations* of symbolic meaning, and as cultural references.

(2) *Roles*. On a symbolic level, we can identify different roles, such as the figure of Christ (in the baptism and washing sequence), the role of the herdsman/shepherd (walking through the crowds with the wooden stick), the role of an animal (crawling on the floor), the role of a guard (referring to Parsifal), or the role of a collector (during the action where he gathers pieces of gelatine from the walls).

By representing such different roles various religious, mythical and aesthetic contexts are juxtaposed and blended. If we follow this description of personas, we may similarly identify a list of roles adopted by the audience. They are, first, the Apostles or followers of Jesus, or a Christian community witnessing a baptism; next, a herd of sheep; thirdly, a swarm of animals; fourthly, the knights of the Grail, and so forth.

The question remains if the audience had read these roles into the actions, and did consciously adopt them. But even if they did, it was not enough for them to impersonate an attributed role affirmatively. Rather, the participants created and displayed the roles they chose for themselves, such as the role of ‘troublemakers’ performed by students who disturbed the action and distributed anti-art-leaflets, or the role of an annunciator, performed by a young lady who suddenly climbed the piano, shouting ‘Bitte machen Sie Platz, der Herr Beuys kann ja nicht atmen.’¹⁶

The multiple creation of roles turned the relationship between the audience and the artist into a permanent play – or even a struggle.

Conclusion

The performance *Celtic+...+...* shows diverse modes of action that are reminiscent of the liturgy of the Catholic Mass: the Orans gesture of prayer (baptism sequence)¹⁷ as well as the gesture of demonstration (the blackboard action, and the gelatine sequence). Beuys refers to the repertoire of Christian iconography by sequences of actions, in which he performs distinct and concentrated gestures. Critics have interpreted these acts of the artist as a figuration of Christ. Beuys was dubious about such notions of aesthetic embodiment. For him, it is clear that he did not impersonate Jesus, but that he tried to refer to a ‘Christian impulse.’ To the extent that Beuys insisted on the very process of doing and of performing—and in relating these to religious acts—we can understand his deeds as a ‘profanation.’

As Giorgio Agamben has recently argued, profanations are reinterpretations or inversions of that which has been separated from life.¹⁸ The religious is a prime example of such a separation. A profanation is the playful use of something thus separated as the canon of sacred forms. This playful use frees the sacred object or act from the taboos that surround it, such as touching the sacred object or performing the sacred gesture in an improper context. Thus, the new form of use is reintegrated into the sphere of living coherence. This use is not the same as the utilitarian consumption of goods—it ‘does not signify the lack of care (...) but rather a new dimension of usage.’¹⁹

Consequently, only the performative employment can dissolve the traditional sacral contexts of meaning from an object or an act. Profanation may stimulate new modes of perception and interpretation.

Notes

- 1 BUCHLOH, Benjamin, ‘Reconsidering Joseph Beuys: Once Again’, in: RAY, Gene, ed., *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, D.A.P., New York, 2001, p. 82. Buchloh’s first essay on Beuys was entitled: ‘Beuys, the Twilight of the Idol: Preliminary notes for a Critique’, in: *Artforum*, 18, 5 (January 1980), pp. 35-43.
- 2 KREINATH, Jens, SNOEK, Jan, STAUSBERG, Michael, eds., *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, Brill, Leiden, 2006.

- 3 WULF, Christoph and ZIRFAS, Jörg, *Die Kultur des Rituals: Inszenierungen, Praktiken, Symbole*, Fink, München, 2004.
- 4 See Claude Levi-Strauss' concept of ritual as a 'paralangage' in: LEVI-STRAUSS, Claude, 'The Structural Study of Myth', *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (1955), p. 428-444.
- 5 TURNER, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Antistructure*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1969.
- 6 VAN GENNEP, Arnold, *Les Rites de passage*, Nourry, Paris, 1909.
- 7 KAPROW, Allan, 'Happenings are Dead: Long Live the Happenings!', 1968, in: KAPROW, Allan, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1993, p. 64.
- 8 KAPROW, *idem*, p. 64.
- 9 'Ich habe ja die Figur des Schamanen wirklich angenommen (...). Nun allerdings nicht um zurückzuweisen in dem Sinne, dass wir wieder zurückmüssen (...) sondern um etwas Zukünftiges auszudrücken, weil der Schamane für etwas gestanden hat, was in der Lage war, sowohl materielle als auch spirituelle Zusammenhänge in eine Einheit zu bekommen.' Beuys in SCHNEEDE, Uwe, *Joseph Beuys: Die Aktionen*, Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1994, p. 336.
- 10 FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, Routledge, London 2005.
- 11 BEUYS, Joseph, 'Ich durchsuche Feldcharakter', in: HARLAN, Volker, RAPPMANN, Rainer, SCHATA, Peter, *Soziale Plastik: Materialien zu Joseph Beuys*, Achberger Verlagsanstalt, Achberg, 1984, p. 121.
- 12 BRANDSTETTER, Gabriele, 'Ritual as Scene and Discourse: Art and Science Around 1900 as Exemplified by Le Sacre du printemps', in: *The World of Music*, 40, 1 (1998), p. 37-59, here p. 38.
- 13 SCHNEEDE, *idem*, pp 274-299; A further analysis of the performance is given in: GRONAU, Barbara: Theaterinstallationen. *Performative Räume bei Beuys, Boltanski und Kabakov*, München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2010.
- 14 'A deep transformation and metamorphosis – a conversion of the art itself'. Beuys in: KRAMER, Mario, *Joseph Beuys: Das Kapital Raum 1970-77*, Staeck, Heidelberg, 1991, p. 10.
- 15 As an example see the article of FEHR, Hans Otto, in *Heidelberger Tageblatt*, 8 Apr. 1971.
- 16 „Please step back, Mister Beuys cannot breathe!' This scene is documented in *Joseph Beuys: Celtic+~~~~, TV documentation directed by Hans Emmerling*, 1971, black/white, ca. 35 minutes, Joseph Beuys Medienarchiv, Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart Berlin. The image no. 3 by Kurt Wyss shows the interaction between Beuys and the young lady.
- 17 HUBER, Eva, 'Die Aktionsmodi', in: BEUYS, Joseph, CHRISTIANSEN, Henning, *Hauptstrom und Fettraum*, ed. Eva Huber, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, 1993, pp. 98-109.
- 18 AGAMBEN, Giorgio, *Profanierungen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2005, pp. 70-91.
- 19 AGAMBEN 2005, p. 73.

HERMANN NITSCH AND THE THEORY OF THE 'ORGIES MYSTERIES THEATRE'

Mario BÜHRMANN and Heiner REMMERT

Abstract

This essay discusses the Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch and focuses on his idea of the 'Orgies Mysteries Theatre.' We will question the work of Nitsch from three distinct perspectives. What do the concepts of 'religion,' 'ritual,' and 'art' mean in his theoretical and practical oeuvre? Do artist and audience play certain roles during the event? Does Nitsch's current work still hold on to the premise of staging 'solely real events,' or has his attempt at ritualism deteriorated into pure spectacle?

at the moment there is a lot of fashionable talk about cult and ritual in art.
(Hermann Nitsch)¹

Few works of art since the mid-twentieth century match those of the Viennese painter and performance artist Hermann Nitsch (born 29 August 1938) in the intensity of the debate on the legitimacy and interpretive problems of the artistic-excessive breaking of taboos that they have ignited. But the uncertainty and outrage that have constituted the reaction to his oeuvre were not instigated by his paintings and graphic work,² which have been in the public eye since the end of the fifties. Rather, they were prompted by his performances or 'actions' (*aktionen*) which, under the direction of the artist himself, aim at what he has described as 'ecstasy' and 'instinctual discharge' (*triebdurchbruch*)³ for all those participating. In the course of these actions, lamb and ox carcasses are disembowelled and torn apart, and their entrails repeatedly doused by the participants with blood, urine and other fluids. The pivotal works of this genre are the eight 'discharge of suppressed energy plays' (*abreaktionsspiele*) that took place primarily in private spaces, but also in galleries, between 1961 and 1971, as well as the 'Orgies Mysteries Theatre.' Nitsch has been performing the O.M. Theatre continuously since 1973 in Schloss Prinzendorf, a castle in Lower Austria that he bought two years earlier.

In this essay we will first turn toward the conceptual grounding Nitsch has developed for these actions and look closely at the problematic implications of

his writings. At the centre of this investigation will be 'religion,' 'ritual,' 'art' and 'theatre,' concepts that are key to his theoretical framework. The concluding part of the essay will use Nitsch's *I22nd Action*, realized in 2005 at the Burgtheater in Vienna, as a basis to discuss the question of whether and to what extent the Austrian action artist, when putting his theory into practice, still follows his early assumptions and objectives, as he expressed them in relation to the above-mentioned concepts.

Theory and Practice

Numerous essays, manifestos, and lectures published by Nitsch since the 1960s depict his ambition of providing a sound conceptual foundation for the artistic project (as he regards it) of the O.M. Theatre. These publications, presented as 'vitalising' supplements to his actions⁴, confirm him as a representative of the neo-avant-garde who seek to advance their emancipatory agenda both on a practical and theoretical level. It is, however, questionable whether Nitsch's theoretical work fulfils this ambition. One soon realizes the discrepancy between the abundance of his reflections on the one hand and their lack of persuasive power on the other hand. This shortcoming is based not least on Nitsch's inconsistent methodology, which is the result of his critical stance on academia having overshot its target.

In his essay 'Thoughts on the Theory of Actionism and the O.M. Theatre,' for instance, the artist stresses that studying Kant and Husserl shattered his belief in the objectivity of academic inquiry while also arousing his scepticism toward language, and especially toward academic language:

the impossibility of exact definitions became clear to me. there are no static concepts, everything is constantly changing. (...) why can nobody imagine that thinking is also possible outside of the rules of the game of academia.⁵

Such a declaration, which withdraws his own concepts from the (more insinuated than proven) 'dogmatics' of academic argumentation on grounds that they do not seem fitting, is in itself (up to this point) perfectly legitimate. Naturally, however, this declaration does limit the circle of people who can comprehend a theory to those people who 'understand [his] work on their own account,' as Nitsch himself rightly concludes. But this explanation, with which Nitsch postulates his status as an outsider, loses its bindingness at least from the moment he counters the criticism that his 'theory' and 'all [his] work' is 'a miring in the swamp of the irrational'⁶ with

the claim that he makes use of ‘by all means scholarly methods’ when producing his conceptions, as his project could not dispense with ‘systematics and analysis.’

Nothing other than a pragmatic understanding of theory, however, which declares all systematics and analysis obsolete, is expressed in his conviction that ‘when all our theories result in us realizing our work, then that suffices.’⁷ Against this background it is not surprising that Nitsch at no point in his writings makes an effort toward a differentiating discussion of his theories, nor has he reflected upon their possible falsification. The attempted immunization of his convictions against such falsification is also apparent in the fact that he has completely ignored the current problems and debates within the disciplines relevant for his conceptions (here in particular the disciplines of psychology, religious studies, and the classics). For example, his reconstruction of ancient Dionysiac myths and cults is based exclusively on the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Erwin Rhode and Walter F. Otto, and therefore on the state of research of the 1930s.

In what follows we will not be able to look in detail at the numerous objections and protests that have long been directed at Nitsch’s actions (his publications have never received a similar sort of attention).⁸ Rather, by means of an example, we



**Hermann Nitsch, *122. Aktion* (Vienna, Burgtheater, 2005).
Photo: Georg Soulek**

will investigate from the viewpoint of ritual and performance theory the consequences of the aforementioned gesture of inviolability. The artist defends himself emphatically against accusations that his actions and his writings pursue satanic or blasphemous intentions. Even if he confronts 'all religions critically' (especially in their institutionalized form, in which they 'operate as a political force'⁹) his scepticism is not directed toward the essence of religion.

it has always been believed that i get drunk on blasphemy and want to denounce christianity. in fact christianity was for me the last religion still alive (...) which still enabled me to enter into the realm of the mythical, making possible for me the vista onto the earliest forms of culture.¹⁰

Nitsch believes that this view onto the historical development of religious beliefs and practices, also capturing their beginnings, sheds light equally on the psychological state of a people at a given time: 'the history of religions is identical with the history of our psyche.'¹¹ Looking at them from a functionalist perspective, religions for Nitsch appear to be living expressions of 'world-explanation and coming-to-terms-with-life teachings (*welterklärungs- und lebensbewältigungshren*)';¹² they 'originate from nature, rise almost vegetatively from our consciousness.'¹³ Being 'vegetative' entities, he alleges, they are, however, also subject to the creation, maturation and decay process of everything organic:

like an organism [religions] have a life of their own. they are born, they live and they die, they replace each other. (...) when a religion is too old, has no contemporary force of expression any more, does not correspond to the state of consciousness of its cultural group, a new one starts to bud and after multiple battles asserts itself against the old one.¹⁴

Probably not by coincidence (but, of course, without mentioning it) Nitsch connects his concept of religion, which emphasizes its organic nature, with the term 'cultural circle' (*Kulturkreis*). The German ethnologist Leo Frobenius (1873-1931), who introduced the theory of the *Kulturkreis*, also assumed in his later writings an organic nature of cultures that (like religions in Nitsch's understanding) lived their own lives independent of human influence.¹⁵

Nitsch's understanding of religion does not only rest on dubious historico-philosophical presumptions but is also problematic for at least two more reasons. First, the statements about the origins and the essence of religion are purely speculative. Second, they completely exclude the reflection and intellectual creativity that are consciously applied to the development and reformation of religions.

The idea of a 'supersession contest among religions' is also the basis for Nitsch's convictions on the transformation of ancient religious motifs into Christian dogma: 'the extreme attitudes to morality of christianity, the repression of sexuality shifted, transformed dionysian frenzy, the orgiastic into the christian sacrifice. the dionysian surge turned into the passion.'¹⁶ Reverting to Freud's vocabulary¹⁷ and Nietzsche's motifs, Nitsch not only makes a claim on the status of the artist but also on that of the therapist. The objective of the O.M. Theatre, he claims, is to 'free the repressed dionysian vitality from its prison. i wanted to reach down into the deepest strata of the psyche and reverse the values again (...) i wanted christ to become dionysus again.'¹⁸

The 'primal excess' (*urexzess*)¹⁹ that can be experienced during the dismemberment of animals dissolves discrepancies, Nitsch claims, and destabilizes the 'order crafted' primarily by Christianity, an order in which 'immanence and transcendence, flesh and soul, instinct and intellect, eros and the sacred' are kept in strict opposition. From the convergence of opposites a tension results which 'might be misunderstood as blasphemy. the dramaturgy of my theatre finds in the dissolution of the opposites mentioned a dramatic conflict which is to be resolved.' In the context of this 'dissolution of opposites' in the 'primal excess,' the specifics of religious beliefs and practices ultimately take a backseat. And more than that. By enabling the 'developmental process of the participants in the play,' in which each one of them can 'transcend and experience himself inside of an infinitely and eternally expanding whole,'²⁰ the negation of specific religious beliefs and practices becomes the necessary condition of the therapeutic effect. Thus Nitsch's actions ultimately turn out to be surrogates of religious practices, which aim for the 'experience' of the 'primal excess,' that in turn could allegedly only be experienced in the ancient Greek religion and could not be comprehended discursively. Nitsch's actions aim for this experience, however, without wanting to bind themselves to the conceptual fundamentals of religions in general. The religious guise of the actions, therefore, is mere window-dressing,²¹ with which the O.M. Theatre nevertheless cannot dispense.

Ritual as Therapy

The animal dismemberments performed as part of the O.M. Theatre are in Nitsch's view the decisive 'tools' of his therapeutic enterprise. Nitsch refers to the participants in his action rituals (*aktionsrituale*) as 'participants in the play,' but not as actors. In contrast to the execution of a ritual on a theatre stage, which only imitates the ritual's form, the rituals of the O.M. Theatre are supposed to allow



**Hermann Nitsch, *122. Aktion* (Vienna, Burgtheater, 2005).
Photo: Georg Soulek**

no distance for those involved: ‘my theatre stages solely real events. [it stages] rituals which want to sensitize and intensify existence, rituals of sensory perception, which carry us deeper into our existence.’²² Thus, he claims, his work ‘exceeds the entire genre of theatre, it is more than theatre, it is the attempt to contrive a cult for the vitality of existence, for the cosmic event of creation.’²³ The object of every performance is an intensification of perception as a result of excess. This intensification of perception is supposed to embrace all those present.²⁴ This includes three groups: the surrounding audience, the ‘active protagonists,’ and the ‘passive protagonists.’ The ‘passive protagonists’—mostly naked, fixed onto wooden rods, robbed of their visual orientation by a blindfold—allow themselves to be covered in torn-out animal entrails and doused in blood by the other participants. While Nitsch, on the one hand, differentiates the ‘synaesthetic ritual[s]’²⁵ of the O.M. Theatre from performed ritual actions on stage, he also, on the other hand, warns against categorizing his rituals as imitations of ancient cult practice:

by no means should my work be confused with a reproduction of ancient cults. cult and ritual forms are part of my form, my artistic language. ritual was and is always a decisive part of all art. my work is a form of cult with respect to life but never a reproduction. at the moment there is a lot of fashionable talk about cult and

ritual in art. one does not need to superimpose ritualistic elements onto art, they are in it as formal means of expression. it is part of art's very own being, to show itself as cult and ritual. the leitmotifs of wagner, monet's cathedrals and haystacks, skrzjabin's and georges' art are ritualistic expressions.²⁶

These remarks underscore the findings above that Nitsch views rituals as formalized and repetitive sequences of actions which, although they appear in religious guise, can forego a dependency on religious convictions (and therefore are also not limited to the religious sphere).²⁷ Understood in this way, rituals are defined not by their origins but instead by their repetitive structure, whose sole effect it is to intensify perception.²⁸ Nitsch's conceptions of religion, ritual, and art converge as the core elements of his action theatre. He understands art 'fundamentally as religious practice, not bound to any denomination.' This freedom, however, goes hand in hand with one of its most noble duties, that is, to be 'cult in respect to life, to creation.' The intention to connect everyday life, religion, art, and ritual, in order to arrive, via 'rituals of life,' at a 'liturgy of life,'²⁹ represents, as Nitsch has recently put it, the vanishing point of his work: 'the aesthetic ritual of the game should determine the everyday course of life, should spread itself upon it, enter it, and still more: the ritual could dissolve in the intensive festive experience.'³⁰ With this, the selectivity of the terms 'religion,' 'ritual' and 'art' in Nitsch's conception also dissolves.

The accusations of blasphemy and even Satanism directed at the performances of the O.M. Theatre appear to be, in fact, much less justifiable than the criticism of their pseudo-academic grounding. One would equally be mistaken to prematurely equate Nitsch's action art with political or social actionism, as in its self-understanding this art by no means seeks permanently to overcome religious practices and cultural taboos imprinted by Christianity. When Nitsch in his actions not only makes reference to ancient sacrificial rituals³¹ but also takes his inspiration from Christian—and especially Catholic—liturgy, then this is primarily so because he views liturgy as an antitype to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* appealing to all five senses, which is only truly realized by his O.M. Theatre.³² He claims to identify in the specific belief in transubstantiation during the Eucharistic Mass 'conduits to action and to the totalizing action theatre.'³³ This is why he does not want to abolish the Mass but merely complement it with the carnal and libidinal elements it apparently has lost—ideally in the form of regularly performed, days-long plays in Prinzendorf. At the same time, Christian liturgy is indispensable to him as an instrument that helps produce the 'experience of the discharge of suppressed energies' (*abreaktionserlebnisse*).

In accordance with his evolutionary understanding of religion, Nitsch postulates in his theoretical writings a history of culture and consciousness whose primary characteristic is a progressive alienation of man from the ‘untamed instinctual realm,’ an alienation that reaches its climax in Christianity.³⁴ Similarly, Nitsch stages a presence within the scope of his Prinzendorf plays which—as he needs them as a negative foil to his transformative actions—ascribes an anachronistically great importance to Christian symbols, liturgical practices and cult objects. The attitude of the O.M. Theatre toward Christianity is at least as much affirmative as it is subversive. Its strategy is first to raise the value of Christianity in its current cultural meaning in order then to accuse it of a ‘reality deficit,’ which the O.M. Theatre is supposed to remedy.

The 122nd Action at the Burgtheater

Moving beyond these principal findings and focusing on the most recent years, it can be established that Nitsch’s theatre and the society it supposedly discredits have moved in ever more convergent directions. Seemingly symptomatic above all of this development is the *122nd Action* of the O.M. Theatre, which took place in November 2005 in and around the Vienna Burgtheater. As usual, critics were



Hermann Nitsch, *122. Aktion* (Vienna, Burgtheater, 2005).

strongly divided by the staging, but at the same time it posed a question particularly interesting from a sociological perspective. Should the fact that Nitsch is no longer in a hostile relationship with the Austrian public but instead has been invited into the 'sacred halls' of the Burgtheater be interpreted as a sign of social change, maybe even of a resurgence of basic religious needs, or is one perhaps witnessing the final capitulation of an artist to the cultural institutions, an artist who has ultimately sold out of his life's work and is now allowing it to deteriorate into pure spectacle?

Holding the action up to its theoretical foundation, one is inclined to subscribe to the latter interpretation. What Nitsch presented in Vienna was not only a decidedly toned-down version of his earlier 'discharge of suppressed energy plays,' but also must be seen in many ways as a break with his existing aesthetic programme. Whereas the artist, for instance, previously stressed the importance of noise, screaming, and atonality in his work, the staging at the Burgtheater—in collaboration with the Young Philharmonics and the Choir of the University of Vienna and under the direction of the Italian conductor Andrea Cusumano—for the first time employed harmonic progressions. Nitsch by no means wants this to be understood as a betrayal of his ideas or as a concession to the audience, but refers in retrospect to the *122nd Action* as a performance 'without compromise.'³⁵ In the turn toward harmonic, ethereal sounds he merely sees a natural maturation in the work of a now more experienced artist. The music now sounded even 'more corpulent and orgiastic.'³⁶

With the shift in musical style he has, however, most likely accommodated the aesthetic sensibilities of the audience as he has probably also done with the decision to show Vroni Schwegler, a former female student of his master class, naked and blindfolded, performing ballet-like exercises on the edge of the stage throughout the entire play. The function of these motion sequences within the O.M. Theatre was not evident, but they were likely a welcome change for those members of the audience who, in the course of the seven and a half hours of the show, were disgusted or simply bored by the actions of the actual participants in the play. Similarly, if one considers the indispensable role that the O.M. Theatre previously assigned to the overwhelming of the audience's olfactory perception, the increased use in the *122nd Action* of pig lungs, which apparently develop less of a smell than bowels, can scarcely be understood as anything but another concession to the audience.

Conclusion

Across the board, Nitsch's stint at the Burgtheater was marked less by confrontation than by shielding. Just as the halls of the Burgtheater were meticulously covered in plastic film and the carpets in the foyer removed to protect them from defilement with blood, so too did the O.M. Theatre's first-ever use of live video projections enable the audience to keep a safe distance from the happenings without having to forego a comfortable view. The whole production was a far cry from immediacy and active experience. The performed actions themselves, however, presented the most drastic deviation. Until the finale, when a few play participants jointly trampled grapes and tomatoes on stage while being doused in bucketloads of blood, there were no ecstatic scenes at all. The greater part of the performance was limited to *tableaux vivants* that repeatedly employed oversized spears in an overt allusion to the theme of salvation in Wagner's *Parsifal*. Thus the erstwhile most important principle of the O.M. Theatre—to banish referentiality from art and replace it with a 'theatre of real happenings'—was explicitly abandoned.³⁷

Notes

- 1 NITSCH, Hermann, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters: Zweiter Versuch*, Residenz, Salzburg, 1995, p. 12. In the following text, Nitsch's exclusive and in German unconventional use of lower case will be maintained when quoting him.
- 2 Nitsch's splatter paintings are the result of expressive, ecstatic splattering of paint or blood onto the canvas. In regard to this technique Nitsch views himself in the tradition of informal action painting; at the same time he repeatedly stresses the close connection between this form of painting and his action theatre.
- 3 NITSCH, Hermann, 'Von den Wurzeln der Tragödie' [1963], in: NITSCH, Hermann, *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater: Manifeste. Aufsätze. Vorträge*, Residenz, Salzburg, 1990, p. 15-19, here p. 19.
- 4 NITSCH, 'Gedanken zur Theorie des Aktionismus und des O.M. Theaters' [1989], in: *idem*, p. 158-166, here p. 161.
- 5 NITSCH, *idem*, p. 159.
- 6 NITSCH, *idem*, p. 162.
- 7 NITSCH, *ibidem*. He confronts the 'old-fashioned' scholarly demand for exactness and objectivity with his 'neomythological phantasies and attempts at world explanation' and insists that these phantasies and explanations are also 'right in their way' without, however, supporting this claim convincingly. (NITSCH, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, p. 5.)
- 8 See NITSCH, Hermann, *1., 2., 3. und 5. Abreaktionsspiel: Urfassungen, Polizeiberichte, Gerichtsakten*, Fondazione Morra, Naples, 1976, and JASCHKE, Gerhard, ed., *Reizwort Nitsch: Das Orgien Mysterien Theater im Spiegel der Presse 1988-1995*,

- Sonderzahl, Vienna, 1995.
- 9 NITSCH, Hermann, 'Mein Verhältnis zum Christentum' [1989], in: NITSCH, *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater*, p. 152.
- 10 NITSCH, *idem*, p. 148.
- 11 NITSCH, *ibidem*. In this context Nitsch makes use of concepts taken from Freud and Jung. He isolates certain elements of these concepts to then synthesize them into his own theory irrespective of their defining specifics (e.g., the critical attitude toward religion that informs Freud's concepts).
- 12 NITSCH, *idem*, p. 151.
- 13 NITSCH, *ibidem*.
- 14 NITSCH, *idem*, p. 146.
- 15 For the multiplicity of attempts to define religion, cf. the collection in LEUBA, James H., *A Psychological Study of Religion, its Origin, Function, and Future*, Macmillan, New York, 1912. Cf. GISEL, Pierre, TÉTAZ, Jean-Marie, eds., *Théories de la religion, Labor et Fides*, Genève 2002; cf. AUFFARTH, Christoph, MOHR, Hubert, 'Religion', in: VON STUCKRAD, Kocku, ed., *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, vol. III, Brill, Leiden, 2006, p. 1607-1619. For the recent attempt of the sociology of religion to establish a concept of religion, cf. RIESEBRODT, Martin, *Cultus und Heilsversprechen: Eine Theorie der Religionen*, Beck, Munich, 2007.
- 16 NITSCH, *idem*, p. 147.
- 17 Thus does Nitsch already in his earliest writings refer to Christianity as a fascinating 'symptom of a disease' and 'collective neurosis'. (NITSCH, *idem*, p. 147.)
- 18 NITSCH, *ibidem*.
- 19 'the primal excess is unreserved surrender to a yes to life (...) it knows no distinction between destruction and construction, lust and pain, death and life, crucifixion and resurrection, and it is nothing but constant impetus for change.' (NITSCH, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, p. 13.)
- 20 NITSCH, 'Mein Verhältnis zum Christentum', p. 149.
- 21 DÜCKER, Burckhard, *Rituale: Formen—Funktionen—Geschichte*, Metzler, Stuttgart, 2007, p. 95.
- 22 NITSCH, Hermann, 'ritual als ausdrucksform der kunst', in: UHL, Florian, BOELDERL, Artur R., ed., *Rituale: Zugänge zu einem Phänomen*, Parerga, Düsseldorf, 1999, p. 103-113, here p. 111.
- 23 NITSCH, *ibidem*.
- 24 SCHECHNER, Richard, 'Performers and Spectators Transported and Transformed', in: *Kenyon Review*, 3/4 (1981), p. 83-113.
- 25 NITSCH, Hermann, 'Vorwort', in NITSCH, *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater*, p. 5.
- 26 NITSCH, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, p. 12.
- 27 On the differentiation of concepts of ritual, see KREINATH, Jens, ed., *Theorizing Rituals: Volume I: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, Brill, Leiden, 2006; as well as BOUDEWIJNSE, Barbara, 'Ritual', in: VON STUCKRAD, *idem*, p. 1635-1640.
- 28 For an informed criticism of such a 'simple stimulus-response model' of how ritual works without regard to religious convictions, see ASAD, Talal, 'The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category', in ASAD, Talal, *Genealogies of Religion:*

- Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993, p. 27-54, here p. 50.
- ²⁹ NITSCH, 'ritual als ausdrucksform der kunst', p. 110.
- ³⁰ NITSCH, *idem*, p. 112.
- ³¹ For a discussion of Nitsch's view of antiquity and his adoption of psychoanalytical interpretation of myth, which cannot be dealt with in depth here, see Ekkehard STÄRK's fundamental work: *Hermann Nitschs 'Orgien Mysterien Theater' und die 'Hysterie der Griechen': Quellen und Traditionen im Wiener Antikebild seit 1900*, Fink, Munich, 1987. See also: FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika, 'Verwandlung als ästhetische Kategorie: Zur Entwicklung einer neuen Ästhetik des Performativen', in: FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika, KREUDER, Friedemann, PFLUG, Isabel, eds., *Theater seit den 60er Jahren: Grenzgänge der Neo-Avantgarde*, Francke, Tübingen, 1998, p. 21-91, here p. 28.
- ³² 'in the interior space, in the theatre of the church, architecture, sculpture, painting and music brought a *gesamtkunstwerk* into existence through the drama of the mass. (...) all five senses are affected. the floral decoration of the altars came about for the enrichment of all the visual arts. the scent of flowers and the fume of incense affected the sense of smell. the sacrament of communion affected the sense of taste, the body of the lord was eaten in the form of bread. as a matter of fact, the drama of the mass meets all the demands of modern theatre. nothing is acted, everything actually happens.' NITSCH, 'Mein Verhältnis zum Christentum', p. 155.
- ³³ NITSCH, Hermann, 'Versuche zur Geschichte der Aktion' [1971], in: NITSCH, *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater*, p. 50.
- ³⁴ NITSCH, 'Von den Wurzeln der Tragödie', p.16.
- ³⁵ NITSCH, 'Das Orgien Mysterien Theater, 122. Aktion', in: BACHLER, Klaus, RYCHLIK, Ottmar, eds., *Hermann Nitsch. 2005. Burgtheater Wien, Burgtheater, Vienna*, 2006, p. 9-11, here p. 11.
- ³⁶ NITSCH, *idem*, p. 11.
- ³⁷ NITSCH, 'ritual als ausdrucksform der kunst', p. 111.

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