“Tête-à-tête avec Antonin Artaud:” On the Communicability of the Void

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ABSTRACT

This article uses Bataille’s concept of the void to illuminate “Tete-a-tete avec Antonin Artaud,” or an intimate conversation with the French poet that occurred on the night on January 13, 1947. From nine until midnight, Artaud sat on stage at the Theatre Vieux Colombier in Paris and proceeded with a largely unrehearsed lecture. He read poems, described his previous trips to Mexico and Ireland, and gave a vivid and grotesque account of the nine years he spent suffering in insane asylums. Through his exaggerated gestures, his gaunt appearance, his unsensical poems, frightening shrieks and prolonged silences, Artaud creates a heightened state of anguish within the Vieux Colombier that brings him and the audience to the realm of nonknowledge by creating a break within the understood notions of performance. Audience members are left with no prescribed reaction. Artaud creates the depths of nonknowledge within the theater and forces himself and his audience into the surging void.

Keywords: Artaud, Bataille, madness, performance, void
When he came on stage, his emaciated and haggard features reminiscent both of Baudelaire and of Edgar Allan Poe; when his hands hovered about his face like two birds of prey, ceaselessly clawing at it; when he started to chant his beautiful but barely audible poems in his hoarse voice choked by sobs and tragic stutterings—we felt ourselves lured into that danger zone, and as if we were reflections of that black sun, caught up in the all-devouring combustion of a body consumed by spiritual fire.

—Maurice Saillet

The magic of electric shocks sucks out a death rattle, it plunges the shocked person into that death rattle with which one leaves life.

—Antonin Artaud

On the night of January 13, 1947, playwright, poet, actor, and director Antonin Artaud appeared at Paris’ Theatre Vieux-Colombier. The set was sparse; the stage alit only where the actor sat at a table with a tall pile of papers in front of him that amounted to a fragmented manuscript.

Artaud was no longer the handsome man he had been in his youth and though only 51, had aged remarkably. Recently released from psychiatric care in Rodez, Artaud spent the previous nine years there and in other institutions, including Scotteville-les-Rouen, Sainte-Anne, and Ville-Evrard. The harsh conditions of the asylum paired with an extensive history of electroshock therapy made the striking man gaunt, emaciated, and toothless. Before his internment in asylums, Artaud embodied an extra-human quality: fellow actors agreed that Artaud deserved special parts, “angels or archangels, surrealistic demons, apocalyptic monsters, fantastic people.” 3 He was not classically handsome, yet he had an undeniable and eerie beauty. Because of his lengthy confinement, many believed Artaud to be dead, adding further to the performance’s allure.

Advertised simply as “Tête-à-tête avec Antonin Artaud,” or an intimate conversation with the poet, there was no way for the far overcapacity audience of 900 to predict what awaited them. The poster that publicized the event named three poems he planned to read but did not hint that Artaud intended to give “an accusatory account of his nine years’ suffering in a asylum.”

From 9:00 until midnight, Artaud sat on stage and proceeded with a largely unrehearsed lecture. He read his poems, described his trips to Mexico and Ireland, and performed a “wild improvisation, constantly shattered by cries, screams and savage gestures.” 5 At times his voice was so hoarse and timid that the audience could barely hear his whispers. He was silent for intensely long periods of time. He also shouted aggressively, “syphilis!”

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“cunt!” “masturbation!” He incorporated neologisms in his poems. “Repeatedly, he fell silent. He seemed lost. Repeatedly, he started over.”6 His hands were frantic—he both grasped his face tightly and gestured hystericly.

All of this—his gestures, his appearance, his poems, his silence, and his screams—affectively shocked the audience. It sucked the laughter from them and created a heightened state of anguish and anxiety that night at the Vieux-Colombier. Artaud forcefully ruptured all received and polite notions of performance or lecture. He pushed himself and his viewers past the realm of the palatable—his show was complex, unexpected, and nondiscursive. Tête-à-tête exists at the ends of knowledge, where what remains is an aggressive and striking affectivity. Author André Gide called it utterly unforgettable;7 Saillet describes it as watching the combustion of a body.8 Artaud brought the audience to the edge. He created a space that was simultaneously overflowing and emptied of itself. A clean, empty, and open space untouched by discourse and reached through his transgressions—his nearness to madness, his fixation with death, and his obsessive abhorrence of sex. Combined with Artaud’s excessive emoting at the Vieux-Colombier, his strikingly personal pouring out of self embodied a fissure, something unanticipated.

Artaud’s raw and transgressive originality that night, his ghost-like and demonesque aesthetic, and his unprepared and unorganized autobiographical rants wreaked havoc on his audience. Throughout the three-hour performance, he worked intense dualities. Collectively, these dualities marked the roads by which Artaud and the audience drove away from the ordinary and toward the ledge of knowledge. He was both silent and screaming, still and restless. He spoke at times intelligibly and then at others full of glossolalia. His language throughout the evening was described as being on the border between sense and nonsense,9 as though his speech inhabited a liminal space wherein Artaud was able to create new forms of expression, all the while muddling the minds of the audience. Artaud’s paroxysms breathed tumultuous energy into the Theatre Vieux-Colombier despite his eerily spectral appearance and a fierce fixation with death. Artaud’s “vocal range and idiosyncratic breathing often obscured the sense of words, but their theatricality was intense.”10 Even those in the audience who knew him well had difficulty understanding his linguistic assaults. It was as if his whole body participated in the reciting of his poems.

Artaud’s speech was ripe with glossolalia: incantations or speaking in tongues. Historically, glossolalia was uttered by prophets or used within religious practice and believed to be “immediately accessible to speakers of different languages, universally understandable before any translation at all.”11 Artaud worked often with glossolalia: “In 1934, I wrote a whole book in this sense, in a language that was not French but could be read by everyone, of no

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8 Ibid., 203.
10 Cohn, *From Desire to Godot: Pocket Theater of Postwar Paris*, 57.
matter what nationality.” He also used the form in his theatrical work: “Artaud lavishly used onomatopoeia and gibberish, but required the actors to concentrate on what they were saying and make their replicas with maximum force.” Thus, it was natural for Artaud to speak unsensical words with a fierce intensity. Artaud’s use of such speech was likely all the richer because he grew up around many languages. His native French tongue was complemented by the influence of an Italian governess and a Greek grandmother. Artaud revisited this form in “The Return of Artaud, Le Mômo,” which he read at the Vieux-Colombier:

The anchored mind,
screwed into me
by the psycho-lubricious
thrust
of heaven
is the one that thinks
every temptation,
every desire,
every inhibition.

-o dedi
-o dada orzoura
-o dou zoura
-o dada skizi

-o kaya
-o kaya pontoura
-o ponoura
-a pena
-ponti

Though Artaud’s neologisms are seemingly unintelligible, when combined with his uncanny delivery, his utterances are rife with passion, and they articulate his urgency.

Artaud’s glossolalia was heavily influenced by his trip to Mexico, where he stayed with the native Tarahumara people and participated in their rituals, learned about their gods, and experimented with peyote. His neologisms were tied to a primitivism that Artaud found to be more genuine than much of society. He believed that society created problems rather than alleviated them. The third poem he read that night, *Insanity and Black Magic*, the first truly audible one, outlined these ideas:

If there had been no doctors
there would never have been any sick people,
no dead skeletons
sick people to be butchered and flayed
for it was with doctors and not with sick people that society

began.  

Artaud was staunchly against doctors, psychiatrists, and psychiatric institutions: he saw them as a means of social control and not as therapeutic practitioners. *Insanity and Black Magic* makes these beliefs clear. At the end of this poem, he continues with his paroxysms:

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farfadi
ta azor
tau ela
auela
a
tara
ila
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Combined with his manic and churning hands, the gripping of his face, and his denunciations of society, the neologisms he spat at his audience increased the collective anguish that night at the Vieux-Colombier. It is as if Artaud’s pain and suffering—what he needed to convey to his audience—could in no way be fully represented by language (new words and a way of speaking that included the whole body). Beyond unnerving, this form of representation shows the futility of language by exposing its expressive limits. For Artaud, pure language had nothing to do with grammar or dictionaries. He believed that “All true language/is incomprehensible./Like the chatter/of a beggar’s teeth.” In a letter to George Soulié de Morant, he wrote:

> If it is cold, I am still able to say that it is cold; but it may also happen that I am incapable of saying it: That is a fact, for there is inside me something wrong from the affective point of view, and I am asked why I cannot say it, I shall reply that my internal feeling on this fragmentary and insignificant matter simply does not correspond to the three simple little words which I should then have to utter.

Language was not enough for Artaud, and his unconventional use of sound blurs the lines of language and pokes at its boundaries. That night, Artaud mocked civilized discourse and left the viewer unnerved—able to feel the fragility of and the lack within his or her own means of communication.

Artaud’s lecture was interspersed with painfully long pauses and empty gaps that filled the space of the Vieux-Colombier and left the audience to wait uncomfortably for what

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16 Ibid., 529.
17 Ibid., 531.
18 Ibid., 549.
might come next. His silences slashed any momentum he may have had. Even though each silence signified a lack in the monologue, each one was incredibly full. The quiet thickened the air. Later, Artaud told journalist Maurice Saille, “What I had to say was in my silences not in my words.”\textsuperscript{20} His screaming (long) and forcefully surrounding silences were replete with fear; they forced the audience members to explore their own depths, to try, and to fail, to incorporate Artaud’s performance back into their understanding. His lecture, and his silences, were so far removed from discourse that they could not easily be dismissed or returned into the understandable; thus, they simply hung there, stagnant and heavy in the air. In \textit{The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge}, Georges Bataille writes, “Who will dare to articulate the voluptuousness of inverting things? Silence alone is more voluptuous—more perverse—than the screaming voluptuousness is able to announce. Complete silence. Oblivion in the end.”\textsuperscript{21}

For three hours, Artaud dared to invert things; he turned on its head the notion of performance or lecture, he embodied fear and terror, and he was nearly a living death. He did so through his poetry and his stories and his glossolalia, but his \textit{silence} was possibly his most effective means. His silence was voluptuous—sensual, intriguing, all-encompassing, and painful. His silence surged out toward the audience and made the overcapacity theater somehow more full. Bataille also argues that a phrase can be “uttered in order to establish [the] silence [that] is its own suppression.”\textsuperscript{22} Artaud spent his time attacking language and society. He not only perverted norms, he completely abandoned them. Then Artaud simply stopped, he silenced himself and the audience, and dared the viewers to cope with an unavoidable discomfort. It is as if everything he did that evening only stood to make the silences heavier, to prove that all forms of expression can be wholly stifled by charged and powerful silence. Artaud spoke of taking opium in a similar manner: “It is not opium which makes me work but its absence, and in order for me to feel its absence it must from time to time be present.”\textsuperscript{23} In order for the audience to feel the weight of silence, sound needed to be at times present. Writer Jacques Audiberti, spoke of the profound effect of Artaud’s silences: “Each of his silences thundered like the prelude to the end of man and of the world. Partial panic convulsed the audience…. The silhouette of the lucid madman gesturing around his table created immense shadows that shaped the monsters which will succeed us.”\textsuperscript{24} Audiberti’s reaction helps to illuminate the affective qualities of Artaud’s silences. They led to panic; his silences were understood as the beginning of the end of everything.

Another theme Artaud maintained throughout \textit{Tête-à-tête} was a fixation with death. Journalist André Delmas observed that the poet detested all things that serve to perpetuate human life, including sex and language.\textsuperscript{25} For Artaud, there was “no other issue for pure

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\textsuperscript{20} Barber, \textit{Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs}, 137. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Georges Bataille, \textit{The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge} (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 215. \\
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 199. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Artaud, \textit{Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings}, 339. \\
\textsuperscript{24} Cohn, \textit{From Desire to Godot: Pocket Theater of Postwar Paris}, 60-61. \\
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 59. 
\end{flushright}
thought than death."

26 He had obsessive and denunciatory views on sex that he expressed vehemently within his poetry. Artaud “hated sexuality and all the organs of the body—especially the tongue and heart, which would have to be excised before a true body of shattered bone and nerve could be created.”

27 A true body of shattered bone and nerve. Little could sound harsher or more painful than the shattering of bone and the exposing of nerves—leaving Artaud’s ideal human form the epitome of pain. Such an image embodies the tone that Artaud took with his audience. Instead of shying away from death and pain, he repeatedly rushed toward them, saturated himself in them and, in turn, pushed them out onto his audience and the theater. In her journals, Anaïs Nin further describes Artaud’s nearness to death. In response to Artaud asking Nin if she believed him to be mad, Nin writes,

I knew at that moment by his eyes, that he was, and that I loved his madness. I looked at his mouth, with the edges darkened by laudanum, a mouth I did not want to kiss. To be kissed by Artaud was to be drawn towards death, towards insanity; and I knew he wanted to be returned to life by the love of woman, reincarnated, warmed, but that the unreality of his life would make human love impossible.

28 Not only did Artaud confront death, he embodied it. Nin describes him as being both very attractive and completely repulsive. The audience was forced to be closer than they were likely comfortable with to his madness and his deathly mannerisms.

Artaud’s proximity to darkness was likely influenced by his lengthy stay in mental institutions. In September 1937, immediately upon returning from a trip to Ireland, Artaud was declared mad by the authorities, marking the beginning of a nine-year journey in four asylums. For the first two years of confinement, the poet refused to see or write to his friends. During his stay at Ville-Evrard, where he was confined from February 1939 through January 1943, he wrote letters to friends that told of his humiliation in the ward for drug addicts. He begged Roger Blin to help him be transferred: “Say to yourself: I am going to do that because he is suffering; it is absolutely urgent and necessary.”

30 On February 11, 1943, after much insistence from his friends, Artaud was transferred to Rodez and placed under the care of Dr. Gaston Ferdière.

Dr. Ferdière’s course of treatment was extensive electric shock therapy. When Artaud began the therapy in June of 1943, electroshock treatment was administered without anesthesia. A popular form of therapy used to treat a range of mental illnesses, electroshock tended to reduce symptoms and make the patient more docile. Electrodes were attached to the temples of the patient, and a short burst of electricity was sent through the brain. As the treatment induced seizures, the patient was often strapped to the bed to discourage broken bones, and a spatula was placed inside the mouth to avoid a cut tongue or lost teeth during the convulsions. A coma of 15 to 30 minutes followed, and the patient often awoke with memory loss. At the time, a

27 Barber, Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs, 135.
28 Greene, Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words, 33-34.
29 Ibid., 46.
30 Ibid.
course of around 30 treatments was common. Between June 1943 and December 1944, Artaud underwent 51 treatments. Thirty-six of those were completed after he showed improvement. After his third treatment, “Artaud had to spend two months in bed convalescing and receiving shots of histamine. One of his vertebrae had been fractured.” He then wrote a letter to his doctor begging him to stop the course of treatment; yet, as soon as his back had healed, the electroshock began again. Jacques Latrémolière, the man who actually administered Artaud’s electroconvulsive therapy, described Artaud’s course of therapy in his doctoral thesis:

A., 46 years old, former drug addict, suffering from chronic hallucinatory psychosis, with luxuriant, polymorphous, delirious ideas (doubling of the personality, bizarre metaphysical system...). The patient had gained five kilogrammes in weight when the treatment began on 20 June. From the second session on, he spoke of vague back pains which became violent when he awoke from the third crisis: bilateral, constrictive, increased by the slightest movement, and by coughing, the pains forced him to walk in a bent-over position, with the thorax leaning out to the front.

At the conclusion of Artaud’s electroshock treatment, he had aged remarkably and had lost all of his teeth. On May 26, 1946, Artaud was released from Rodez, “his face was ravaged and white, his cheeks sunken. All his teeth had been lost... He was painfully thin.”

Through his poetry, Artaud presented a version of himself, Artaud-Mômo, that was a “ghostly double and the product of incarceration and electroshock.” He cried in one of his poems, “Old Artaud is buried in the chimney hole which he has had in his cold gum since that day when he was killed!” Artaud eloquently described psychiatric institutions to his audience: “Death too must live; and there’s nothing like an insane asylum to tenderly incubate death.” He found that electroconvulsive therapy forced its recipient into a sort of limbo. Though he was known to say “I am inside my body” as opposed to “I have a body,” electroshock pushed him out of this position. He recalled having watched one of his own electroshock therapy treatments from the ceiling. He described his soul as detaching from his body during the session and being transported above himself. It is likely this same occasion that poet Jacques Prevel writes about: “He [Artaud] recalls one incident from his time in Rodez which he had never mentioned to me before: ‘While I was lying unconscious after an electroshock session I found myself one metre outside of my body… Then, suddenly, tumbled into a hole and I woke up. Dr. Ferdière thought I was dead.”

31 Barber, Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs, 107.
32 Ibid., 107-108.
33 Ibid., 108.
34 Ibid., 107-108.
35 Greene, Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words, 50.
36 Stout, Antonin Artaud’s Alternate Genealogies Self-Portraits and Family Romances, 115.
37 Artaud, Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings, 527-528.
38 Miller, The Passion of Michel Foucault, 95.
40 Shumacher and Singleton, Artaud on Theatre, 203.
He also told the audience of one instance when he had actually died during a procedure and returned to life just as he was being carted off to the morgue by the nurse. On this occasion, the coma that succeeded the treatment lasted an hour and a half instead of the usual 15 or 30 minutes.\textsuperscript{41} He declared that night, “I died under electric shock. I say dead. Legally and medically dead.”\textsuperscript{42} Artaud also likened electroconvulsive therapy to Bardo, a Tibetan word for the period after one life ends and before the next one begins. From “The Return of Artaud, Le Mômo”:

Bardo is the pang of death into which the self falls with a splash, and there is in electric shock a splash state through which every traumatized person passes, horribly and desperately to misunderstand what he was, when he was he, what, law, me, king, thee, what the hell and THAT.

I went through it myself and I won’t forget it.

The magic of electric shock sucks out a death rattle, it plunges the shocked person into that death rattle with which one leaves life.\textsuperscript{43}

Artaud’s collective means of rupturing polite normality, or communicating impossibility, are akin to the “magic of electric shock.” His meditations on death, his gaunt aesthetic, his unsensical language, his spastic gestures, and his mysterious intonation all effectively mesmerized and stunned his audience, plunging them “into that death rattle with which one leaves life,” or carrying them further toward the limits of knowledge. Artaud served as conductor for the current that transgressed discursivity—he electrified his audience. In \textit{Preface to Transgression}, Michel Foucault outlines what this bolt of transgressive electricity is:

\textit{Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed space. Rather, their relationship takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust. Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.}\textsuperscript{44}

Thus, Artaud’s flash of lightning was not the antithesis of the received notion of the lecture. Instead, it was intertwined with the expected, dependent upon it, and stood as a tumultuous disturbance that both illuminated the pitfalls of normalcy and reinforced its existence. Beyond that, it is possible that Artaud’s force created a physical and temporal black hole on that January night. Just as electroconvulsive therapy puts one into a limbo, so did

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\item\textsuperscript{41} Greene, \textit{Antonin Artaud: Poet Without Words}, 108.
\item\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 47.
\item\textsuperscript{43} Artaud, \textit{Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings}, 530.
\item\textsuperscript{44} Michel Foucault, “A Preface to Transgression,” in \textit{Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews} (Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), 35.
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the manifested abyss within the theater place the audience in a limbo—drifting between the known and the unknown. The space was simultaneously overflowed and emptied of itself. Overflowing in the sense that the theater was doubly over capacity, the air was hot and the silence hung down heavy into every crack of the space. Yet, empty because there was barely a shred of discursive relatability remaining in the playhouse. Knowledge had been pushed into the lobby, emptying the room of its comforts. What remained was a hovering and powerful hollowness. A liminal space between life and death, or between knowledge and nonknowledge; a space beyond discourse.

As penetrating a force as he was that night, Artaud in a sense was also absent, a ghost of himself, or mômo. He acted as a medium through which to transmit the infinite gorge of impossibility. He was arguably enacting the subjectile, a concept often attributed to Artaud himself and usually used when referring to texts or two dimensional art. Narrowly defined as the underlying support of a “canvas, paper, [or] text,” the subjectile more generally “is that which makes the text, whether one speaks of words or pictures, appear and yet which, despite its materiality, is immaterial.” The subjectile is present, it is the support between the canvas and the paint. Yet, it is also elusive, not wholly there, indistinguishable from the paint or the canvas. Artaud made the abyss appear within the theater and supported its existence, yet, he was not fully there. He was, instead, the vehicle by which the rupture was able to enter the Vieux-Colombier. He stood as a portal to the unknown, but his presence was so severe that his human-ness was diminished as the intense and unexpected spectacle that he was that night unraveled uncontrollably.

The audience remained silent throughout the performance; having never seen anything like it, there was no prescribed reaction. Even young college students who came with the intention of heckling in the back were almost immediately silenced by Artaud’s gravity. Reportedly, nobody visited Artaud during intermission, and the audience did not know whether or not to leave the theater during that time. After his performance, Artaud made a clumsy gesture and his unkempt manuscript fell across the floor of the stage. When the old man knelt on all fours to pick it up, his glasses also fell to the floor. Time passed painfully slowly as the still-silent theater watched him grope in the dark, searching for his things. Actor and director Roger Blin noted that “his papers flew around...he lost his glasses...He got down on his knees to gather his papers...but naturally there wasn’t a laugh in the room...We were all in extreme anguish.” Eventually, Artaud gave up. After standing with the support of the table, he sat back down. Turning to the audience, Artaud observed, “I put myself in your place, and I can see that what I tell you isn’t at all interesting. It’s still theater. What can one do but be truly sincere?” Afterward, 78-year-old André Gide, a friend of Artaud’s, came onstage, hugged Artaud, and helped him walk into the wings. The electric night had flashed to an appropriately abrupt and unexpected end. The audience remained completely silent as they left the Vieux-Colombier.

46 Ibid.
47 Cohn, From Desire to Godot: Pocket Theater of Postwar Paris, 60.
48 Ibid., 59.
In the introduction to *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, Mary Ann Caws states, “What underlies a text like that of Artaud himself, so visually, verbally, heroically mad...sets out to further a frenzy, to unsense completely, to set things askew — forever.” His affect frenzied his audience. As there was no recording made of the night, not even a photograph taken, all knowledge of the event is based on personal accounts. Outside of being descriptive, the reactions of audience members convey Artaud’s success in communicating the impossible. The atmosphere of the theater was tense, and because there were so many people, it was also very hot. As a result, some audience members fainted during the performance, heightening the sense of urgency within the Vieux-Colombier. Even those who felt the performance took advantage of a deeply suffering madman could not deny its effects. For André Gide, the performance was beauty: “Never before had he seemed so admirable to me. Nothing remained of his material being except expression. His long ungainly form, his face consumed by internal fire.” Gide further begins to articulate the dark infinite space that was created that night at the Vieux Colombier:

*Reason beat a retreat; not only his, but that of the whole audience, of all of us, spectators at that atrocious drama, reduced to the roles of ill-willed supernumeraries, jackasses and mere nobodies. Oh, no, no one in the audience had any more desire to laugh, and Artaud had even taken away from us, for a long time, the desire to laugh. He had forced us into his tragic game of revolt against everything that, admitted by us, remained for him purer, inadmissible.*

Artaud brought the theater to the edge. Like a vacuum, he sucked from his audience all laughter, all enjoyment, until the viewers were left with only a frightening awareness of death and darkness, without the respite of reintegrating their fears into their current notions of life. These affective qualities stuck with the audience members. When Roger Blin tried to read one of Artaud’s poems in the same style months later, he “nearly broke down as he imitated his friend.” Moreover, 19-year-old surrealist poet Sarane Alexandrian was so deeply moved that he felt he “had just had the revelation of a great poet in rebellion against all the invisible powers of the Cosmos, and I hardly slept that night.” So effected by the outpourings of Antonin Artaud, Alexandrian believed that the cosmos were almost within the theater, fighting with Artaud, touching the audience. He lost sleep. The night exposed the artificiality of life to the audience. Gide observed a year later: “We felt ashamed to go back to our places in a world where comfort consists of compromises.”

Artaud’s affect that night at the Vieux-Colombier created a break in the understood notions of performance. His internal fire was contagious, and he drew from each audience member a dormant and unspeakable abyss that created a painfully quiet, voluptuously indulgent silence that engulfed the space of the theater. Saillet conveys this indescribable impossibility at the end of Artaud’s life, as if he were striving toward it since birth: “his face

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50 Cohn, *From Desire to Godot: Pocket Theater of Postwar Paris*, 61.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 58.
and his poetry were instinct with that disturbing gentleness of a soul torn between heaven and hell, a soul that can find the meaning and fulfillment of its perfection only in its own disaster.” In a sense, Tête-à-tête was Artaud’s perfect and singular disaster that achieved the liminal splash between heaven and hell, between life and death that his poetry, his works, and his life had constantly sought. The night was so incredibly original that few re-creations have even been attempted, and its authenticity increases the mystical and mythical elements that surround it. That night, Artaud created depths of nonknowledge within the theater that are near unimaginable, and he forced his audience to come with him on a rushing, dream-like fall into the surging void.

Artaud’s means of expression and the inescapability of his venue stand as one forceful communication of the void. Because Artaud’s raw humanity is undeniable and his platform trapped his audience and forced them to observe, this example stands out. Artaud’s performance is unique—the allure of watching a fallen artist spout his genius or madness onto an audience is both strong and rare. The void, however, is always already present within the world and the self. On a smaller scale, the void creeps into awareness more often.

Incoherent, crude existence and reality inhabiting a different plane, like that of Artaud’s, thrives among us and within us. One of its examples is routine in urban life: that of witnessing the disjointed monologues of individuals grappling with an existence at the crossroads of powerful forces of oppression. A human struggling with poverty and mental health in an American city is something recognizable and normalized. A shirtless man with a scraggly beard and a suspicious reek shouts prophetic visions at those walking by. An uncomfortably thin woman weighed down by a dilapidated duffel bag walks unsteadily along the sidewalk in urgent search of an unspent cigarette butt. These scenes are familiar in city centers across the country and are most often looked over, or looked through and subsequently rendered invisible. When examined more closely, they can be seen as glimpses of the void, bursting through and subtly but persistently terrorizing comfortable life, like a silent gas leak or a slowly growing tumor.

On a surface level, homelessness is branded as transgression because it goes against the high and mighty American ideals of independent success. Thus, not only is homelessness seen as transgressive but so is the homeless individual. Foucault’s lightning metaphor again helps to clarify the significance of this transgression. The transgressive instance is

\[ \text{like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.} \]^{53}

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In the same way that lightning is dependent upon the night it denies, so is the passerby or observer dependent upon the homeless individual, and the existence of each intensifies the other. The two positions are dependent in the basic and abstract sense that without day there is no night. If all humans had shelter there would be no concept or existence of homelessness and vice versa. However, the two are dependent upon each other in the more concrete sense that there are simply not enough resources on the planet to sustain a life of luxury and comfort for all seven billion people. Cheap goods, abundant food and access to resources are limited and afforded to certain groups of humans at the direct expense of other groups of humans due to entrenched histories of colonization, oppression and inequity. Thus, in bearing witness to homelessness, the observer is reminded of his or her implicit participation in and perpetuation of such a transgression.

Each time this scene plays out, the observer’s reactions can range to include disgust, pity, hatred, compassion, anger, feigned distraction or fear. These reactions serve to mask the superficial guilt of the privileged, but they also attempt to spackle a deeper crack. At its core, watching a suffering that is so transparent and tangible elucidates the fragility of normalcy and comfort. It conveys to the better off the futility of existence and stokes an internal fire of fear and philosophical doubt. This moment reminds the witness that his or her perceived success is dubious and vulnerable to illness, accident, heartbreak and pain. Suffering in all of its manifestations is inevitable. The happiness and safety of one life is not gifted or promised based on some greater virtue or merit and is not infinite. The work humans do daily to make life livable, the subtle revisions of painful pasts and the routines we undergo to prolong health and stave off death are mocked and made naked when confronted with real and crude hardship.

Embedded within this moment is an affective understanding of the void. This daily communication of the void is not the fireworks display spectacle of Artaud’s lecture. Its effect is quieter, more personal and intimate, but it is still very real. The void is accessed through madness, sex, and death, or the nearness to those things. Artaud communicated the void and exposed to his audience its existence outside of the Vieux-Colombier. Its communication can manifest in a multitude of moments and can look many different ways. Language for Artaud is not imprisoned by grammar and does not reside within words alone. It is broader, it is all-encompassing, it is affective.

If it is cold, I am still able to say that it is cold; but it may also happen that I am incapable of saying it: That is a fact, for there is inside me something wrong from the affective point of view, and I am asked why I cannot say it, I shall reply that my internal feeling on this fragmentary and insignificant matter simply does not correspond to the three simple little words which I should then have to utter.54

All true language
is incomprehensible,
like the chatter
of a beggar’s teeth.55

55 Artaud, Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings, 549.
A young Antonin Artaud:

An older Artaud after his confinement in asylums:

56 These pictures, like Artaud’s performance and character, are disparate in their origin and untraceable in their production; that is to say, these pictures were thrust into the void of cyberspace, their origins lost to capitalist border creation.
References


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