

Jay Murphy interview conducted by Joseph Nechvatal in early July 2017 on his book *Artaud's Metamorphosis: From Hieroglyphs to Bodies Without Organs* for *The Brooklyn Rail*

<http://brooklynrail.org/2017/09/books/JAY-MURPHY-with-Joseph-Nechvatal>



Antonin Artaud, *Untitled* (1948) graphite, 64 x 49 cm ADAGP, Paris: © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Joseph Nechvatal: Hello Jay. I have just devoured your incredibly rich, incredibly detailed and provocative new book *Artaud's Metamorphosis: From Hieroglyphs to Bodies Without Organs* (Pavement Books) in an uninterrupted two day reading orgy. I found that the serious intensity of your book demands as much. It is not a book easily skimmed - as there is so much to be learned here. Even in the copious footnotes!

I have known you on and off for many years now, but there is so much I don't know about you and your fascination with the *poète maudit* extraordinaire Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) – the laudanum-addled but seminal, visionary, multi-faceted, mid-20th century artist who directly antedates art relevant to our current virtually-enhanced era. You were one of the first to write about my *Computer Virus Project 1.0* (1992-93) for the Parisian *Galleries Magazine* where you demonstrated to me your grasp of the virtual in relationship to contemporary art. This was my early viral contamination computer painting series done at The Saline Royale that reflected on the AIDS epidemic (work that I will be showing in New York at Galerie Richard this November). So I have long been well aware of your

expertise in these matters. But I think that your book *Artaud's Metamorphosis* will amaze readers, even long standing Antonin Artaud admirers such as myself (a passion that began with reading Susan Sontag's book of Artaud's *Selected Writings* in 1976, the year I moved into downtown New York). Later I was stunned by the 1996 MoMA show of drawings *Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper* that was curated by someone I have met in Paris, Margit Rowell.

You and I met a long time ago in New York, but you now live in New Orleans and I in Paris. So let's catch up on what you have been doing in your life and in your curatorial practice. What led you to such an exhaustive deep dive into the magickal chaos of Artaud and your emphasis on tracking his transition (or metamorphosis, as you call it) between his (mystical) white and black periods: a metamorphosis that hinges on the peyote rituals he experienced with the Tarahumaran people in Mexico in 1936 that led to his famous theory of a theater of cruelty based on a "body without organs" (so influential upon Deleuze and Guattari's BwO 'virtual' body as described in their all-important *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*).

Jay Murphy: I'm a bit surprised myself that I took this on as a project. Many figures have been resurrected or renewed in thinking about our digital or now post-digital era – Joyce, Mallarmé, Proust – but I was especially struck by how Artaud had a whole new relevance. This was both in terms of the 'virtual' generally, and very specifically in works like the catastrophic video installations of Gary Hill in the '90s. Artaud is already writing so articulately about the 'virtual' in 1925-1927, as a kind of "life plane" or trajectory involving the body, and the insistence of the 'later' or 'final' Artaud that the 'virtual' remains an arena of intense struggle and combat regarding the projection of the body I find a really useful corrective to seamless notions of the 'virtual' that continue to be passed around. I find Artaud inexhaustible. I first read him in high school, in the Hirschman anthology and *The Theater and Its Double* (1958), but was introduced to him at the beginning when he was quoted in Phil Brown's *Towards a Marxist Psychology* (1974). Brown's book was a birthday present I took at the time as a put-down, since I had the most leftward views of anyone in school at the time. It ended up being extremely productive since I found the quotes from Artaud so very remarkable. Trying to grasp what exactly is going on in a bewildering yet so very germinative essay like his "Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society" is still a challenge, even after I've done an entire section on it in my book.

So I have been reading and thinking about Artaud for a long period of time. There's also the issue that I returned to Artaud, giving a series of papers on him at conferences beginning in the '90's, since I felt the matter of affect (an extremely weak and poor term given what it purports to refer to, but I'm using it here anyway) was not adequately conveyed or engaged by the vast majority of visual and media art I was seeing in New York, or elsewhere. I was motivated to look at Artaud again since he continues to

transmit such extraordinary power. I know many take issue with that – Allen Weiss found *To have done with the judgment of god* (1947-1948) overly “poetic” and Gayatri C. Spivak has spoken of an Artaud taken up into the ‘culture industry’ – on the contrary, I find Artaud opened up some pathways that have still not been closed. One of the distinctive features of *Artaud’s Metamorphosis* is that it is one of the most affirmative views of Artaud that has been published in decades.

There’s also the dimension, of what Isabelle Stengers might call “cosmopolitics.” We live in a period of collapse, of political, environmental, socio-economic, aesthetic systems and motivations that are grinding to a halt or coming to brutal denouements. (Jean-Luc Nancy has compared this to the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages, hence our usual political and economic models lose their coherence). If we were in a more stable era where various ecological systems were working very well, Artaud might be more of a curiosity. But we aren’t. And Artaud is one of the great world poets of collapse and dissolution. If he is about anything, he is about absolute re-invention and re-constitution. That he poses this at the level of the body in such utterly concrete terms is one of the many factors that make him so critically relevant again. Sterlarc dated the carbon body as obsolete as of the early 1970’s – Artaud is already positing this in 1945-1948.

Joseph Nechvatal: There is so much to cover here, but one thing that jumped out at me was how important André Masson’s painting *L’homme* (1924) was to Artaud: a painting Artaud wrote about that shares the same speeding, automatic, ritualistic and revelatory mode of iconographic mark-making seen in Masson’s sex-machinic *Automatic Drawing* from the same year (1924) where a conflict or antagonism is set up between the feminine litheness of curves and hard angles. Slow looking reveals that the image calls to mind Marcel Duchamp’s *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2* (*Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*) (1912). But beyond that there is at work an artistic method which plays in the area of chaotic control/non-control, aiming towards constructing a capricious alliance that associates discourses of machinic grinding with organic sexuality. An expanded field of decentered and distributed subjects pervade the visual lexicon of Surrealism, but Masson is generally considered to have pioneered the automatic drawing technique with an opulence that borders on the decadent by adapting the *écriture automatique* (automatic writing) method of André Breton and Philippe Soupault, who with it composed in 1919 *Les Champs magnétiques* (*The Magnetic Fields*), the first surrealist text. Masson’s graphical automatism created a visual analogy to the *écriture automatique* writing method, based on speed, chance and intuition, but also revealed a certain amount of reflection and artistic strategy. This is all well known, but given Artaud’s stress on spells and magick (that you accent in no uncertain terms), I noted that in the summer of 1924 the English artist and chaos magician Austin Osman Spare, a late-decadent, perversely ornamental graphic dandy in the manner of Felicien Rops, produced a sketchbook of ‘automatic drawings’ of equal disembodied fabula consistent with Artaud’s body without

organs. Entitled *The Book of Ugly Ecstasy*, it contained a series of outlandish pan-sexual creatures produced through automatic (trance induced) means that resembles in their totemic stacking and overlapping transparency the two late-drawings by Artaud you reproduced in your book: both called *Untitled* (1948) (both 64 x 49 cm).



Antonin Artaud, *Untitled* (1948) graphite, 64 x 49 cm © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Considering Spare's elaborate magickal practice of sigiling (condensing letters of the alphabet into diagrammatic glyphs of desire) and given Artaud's voracious appetite for occult material, might it have been possible he knew of Spare's practice of making automatic magickal chaos drawings? Indirect ties between Spare and Masson can be found with Grillo de Givry's 1929 seminal book *Le Musée des sorciers, mages et alchimistes* (*Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy*), an art historical account of where painting, illuminated manuscript, sculpture and architecture connect to the occult heritage that Michel Leiris reviewed in Georges Bataille's *Documents*. Of course, *Documents* was a circuitous challenge to Breton's 'mainstream' Surrealism, as spearheaded by Bataille's scheme for a swank divinatory "war machine against received ideas." Also from 1924 is Masson's intense *Dessin automatique* (*Automatic Drawing*) (1924-1925) that strikes hard as an example of that divinatory practice of finding subconscious desires within vague cues. Like Spare's and Artaud's drawings (from years later), it is a neurotic network of lines that seem fluid but hectic. At times staccato-like. Gradually appearing among the lines is a standing, plugged-in burial casket (we find many caskets floating in Artaud's drawings) surrounded by

phantasmagorical figure motifs that may include boxy object parts merged with anatomical fragments. The sum total gives off a feeling of occultist ferment typical of Artaud's thesis of a body without organs.

Of course, it, like many of Masson's and Spare's and I add Artaud's drawings are really sites of suggestibility full of the duality of violence and whimsy, allowing the viewer to make use of her own liberated and heightened mental faculties to probe the opaqueness of the world and discern concealed forces. In that regard, I have always wondered why Artaud showed no interest in the drawings of Hans Bellmer: drawings that have similar transparent and metamorphic qualities as his own. Do you know?

Jay Murphy: I think your questions bring out the extent to which Artaud, despite his hatred of France, and who at one point writes "it is french which is the cause of the carnage and of the universal madness," remains in a French milieu and is very Paris-centric. He did a version in French of Matthew Gregory Lewis' 1794 Gothic novel *The Monk*, but Anglo references in Artaud are very rare. There's no mention of Spare, or W.B. Yeats, Aleister Crowley and the 'Golden Dawn' for that matter. I would agree that Spare is one of the most developed and credible of the homegrown magus of the time, but Artaud is more concerned with first sources. This is why he would travel to the Sierra Tarahumara to experience peyote rites, but it is also why Artaud, Breton, and other surrealists admired a figure like René Guénon. Guénon was withering in his criticism of mystical syncretisms.

To discuss Artaud's relationship with visual art demonstrates again his singularity. The process of his own drawings at Rodez and at Ivry-sur-seine don't have much to do with automatic drawing, and the surrealist practice of *écriture automatique* was anathema to him. Jean Dubuffet was one of the first collectors of Artaud's drawings, and he considered them in a category of their own. That said, Artaud's art criticism in the 1920's and '30's was frequently remarkable, delineating the "ideal space, absolute" gestating in Masson's *L'homme*, what Évelyne Grossman has called a "transitory" or indeed 'virtual' space, which characteristically for Artaud, despite its location in static art, is in perpetual motion. That Spare's drawings reach a space similar to Artaud's would be a fascinating thesis to pursue; part of my current project on *Artaud Media Theory* (a sort of part two to *Artaud's Metamorphosis*) is to compare the function of the 'virtual' in Artaud and Duchamp. So to bring up Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* as you do, and *The Large Glass* installation (1915-1923) as well, for me cut much closer to the bone.

Artaud's art criticism was also written in a different period, when he was in the midst of his own "occultist ferment," as you say. I have to stress that Artaud's invention of the 'body without organs' is produced in a later one, created in the cauldron of his asylum confinement (1937-1946), and for Artaud it is explicitly a counter-occult, counter-sorcery weapon for aggression and survival. "The

occult,” Artaud writes in 1947, “is born from laziness.” The occult and allied sets of representations, including the mystical paths Artaud seemed to advocate in the 1930’s he now holds in total contempt: “I hold it now in the real, and in my body, like a toilet broom.” This results in Artaud writing almost the opposite about aspects of cubism, for example in 1947, then he does more than a decade earlier. In 1936, according to Artaud, Picasso executes a “living geometry,” as a kind of “seer,” what Artaud elsewhere calls an “occult geometry” that makes up the patternings of the world. Yet in a January 16, 1947 letter to Georges Braque, Artaud doesn’t salute cubism for depicting such a geometry, but champions it rather because it “is a putting into question of the linear occult world,” because it confounds and tears the mechanics of an already made cosmos.

In Paris Artaud is part of an entire milieu that seeks a solution to civilizational ills in the occult or various forms of Eastern mysticism – this is definitely true of surrealists who were personally very close to Artaud such as René Daumal and Robert Desnos, of André Breton (whom various writers have described as a kind of ‘older’ brother to Artaud). Masson was a close friend as well. It is what Scottish poet and theorist Kenneth White characterized as the “shamanic scene” of the time. But the Artaud of Rodez and after rejects this. This gives the drawings to my mind an originality corresponding to their motive force. It makes sense to speak of his drawings at the very beginning of this conversation, since they (and his notebooks they often grew out of), perform a remarkable rebuttal to the psychoanalytic modes of interpretation that have so frequently been offered up to describe them. The “totemism” or stacking up of figures you mention being a case in point. Artaud demolishes any symbolic correspondence they may have, or hierarchal familial-type affiliation (why, for Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘primitive’ totemism anticipated the State). They are rather “anatomies-in-action” as Artaud called them, or assemblages in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense, and quite far from psychoanalytic mechanisms of identification. In the notebooks, they provide an almost documentary day-to-day record of the creation of Artaud’s “new body.”

I honestly don’t know what Artaud would think of Bellmer’s work, or why they weren’t engaged (though I compare their drawings in the book). There are others one would imagine Artaud having an extremely productive exchange with that didn’t occur, Georges Bataille being foremost among them. Bataille seemed to be frightened and repulsed by Artaud. A marked contrast to the somewhat pitiable, purple laudanum-lipped Artaud in Bataille’s memoirs and Anäis Nin’s diaries, is producer/director Roger Blin’s account in his autobiography *Souvenirs et propos* (1986) – there one sees Artaud as a very powerful, dramatic presence in the cafes and embodiment for many young artists of their hopes for a generalized breakthrough (whether in the theater or elsewhere). Sexuality is such a fraught area for Artaud – one of the least appealing aspects of Artaud’s version of ‘body without organs’ is that it is designed to squash any *jouissance* and replace at least dualistic sexuality. Though I don’t know what

Artaud would have thought of Bellmer's project, it does similarly open up to non-homeostatic cycles, going beyond thermodynamic models of desire.

Joseph Nechvatal: This is speculation on my part, but there may have been non-aesthetic political issues that blocked any productive Bellmer-Artaud exchanges. I learned in your book that Artaud was, in 1939, an admirer of Adolph Hitler, going so far as dedicating one of his books to him. Whereas Bellmer was declared a degenerate artist by the Nazis and had to flee Germany for France in 1938 where he was welcomed by the surrealist circles around both André Breton and Georges Bataille.

Perhaps I should not have been shocked by Artaud's pro-Nazi demeanor, given his stress on cruelty in his theory of theater. This is something I need to ask you more about. I have never understood why Artaud asserted ideals for a theater of cruelty when what it appeared to me he was striving for was a theater of *intensity* (based on cosmic hieroglyphs and the extremely graceful dance of Bali - so full of classical restraint typical of high culture). I have long pondered about Artaud's emphasis on cruel ideals for his art (even in his white period) and I think I now understand after reading your book. Am I correct to assume that Artaud's participation in the peyote ritual with the Tarahumaras can be described (in our parlance) as a bad trip? As you describe, he experienced something like the "death of the sun" through an all-over "grinding" that persisted with the insistence of repeated drumbeats. He madly perceives a painted, snickering (cruel) face on this cosmological grinding as it eclipses away the sun. (p. 122) This experience (of what sounds like a bummer) initiates his black period and the "explosion" of his mystical adaptation of magick, tarot, numerological, astrological and alchemical systems: an explosion that led to his internment in Le Havre and elsewhere after "cracking up" the next year in 1937. You point out that Artaud was in fact looking for psychic healing in Mexico (he even withdrew from his drug addiction there) so does interpreting his peyote experience as a bummer help explain the opposite; his encountering of trauma, cruelty and torture? A trauma that he was already expressing in his first drawings at Rodez in 1944 of dense fields of weapons and broken bodies intertwined? Drawings that point towards his building impulse to rage against any and all representation.

Jay Murphy: Artaud does dedicate a copy of his *The New Revelations of Being* (1937) to Hitler in 1943, but this is in the sixth year of a frequently brutal psychiatric confinement. It is unclear whether this is mockery, a backhanded false "tribute" to the man who dominated Europe while Artaud languished, was tortured (and perished, Artaud claimed he died at several points) in asylums. This is the way the poet Jack Hirschman, editor of the 1965 *City Lights Artaud Anthology*, interpreted it. Artaud addresses one of his spells in September, 1939, to Hitler and it demonstrates all the profound ambiguity and ambivalence with which Hitler appears in Artaud's journals. At times he seems to be one of the

*Initiatés*, a being with power who could fight for him, intervene for Artaud and free him from the asylum; at others he is yet another demonic force and threat. What is consistent is only that Artaud seems very unsure of how to place him. Artaud claimed to have met Hitler in the Romanisches Café in Berlin in May, 1932, a meeting, as Stephen Barber points out, that was entirely possible (Artaud's actor jobs sometimes brought him to Berlin in the early '30's). But Artaud also claimed to have been in the bunker with Hitler when he committed suicide on April 30, 1945 – this obviously wasn't. That Hitler constitutes a nearly overwhelming, archetypal vector for Artaud isn't so surprising, this is also true for millions of other people. To characterize the first asylums Artaud was confined in as concentration camps also is not a stretch. Under the Nazi occupation of France all funds to asylums were cut off, consequently inmates frequently were condemned to drinking urine and eating grass to survive. It was in these circumstances that Robert Desnos arranged Artaud's transfer to Rodez, in the 'Free Zone.' But there he was subjected to 51 then-experimental electro-shock treatments in a single eighteen-month period. It is difficult, despite all the painful episodes in Artaud's life, to find anything that compares with the trauma of his treatment in the asylums. Art historian Florence de Mèredieu in her biography of Artaud has pointed out the similarity of the profound suspension of space and time in peyote and electro-shock coma, arguing that Artaud often conflated the experiences.

Artaud isn't 'political' at all in the everyday, normal sense of the term, so to say his complex relation to events prior to and during World War II is "pro-Nazi" I don't think is accurate. Yet you're right in that Artaud was never beholden to leftist ideologies and views in the way Bataille and Breton were, however idiosyncratic their respective communisms. Both determinedly anti-fascist, Bataille and Breton rejoin forces in the short-lived Contre-Attaque group (1935-1936), which Artaud denounces in his Mexico City lectures. In contrast, Artaud, chronically broke, later appealed for aid to Pierre Laval, the minister of culture in the Vichy government, and to futurist Filippo Marinetti, then state poet of the Mussolini regime. Artaud's point that the revolutionary socialisms or communism of the period did not adequately deal with "the question of desire" and so was a revolution of eunuchs, of course is shared in a different manner by Bataille; this is another way of saying that changing the ownership of the means of production is a far from sufficient revolutionary condition, which becomes a commonplace insight by the time of the 1960's New Left.

That this area is so problematic in Artaud is paradoxically why he makes such a fruitful paradigm for Deleuze and Guattari. Artaud can slide with alacrity from the paranoid/fascist pole to the schizo/revolutionary one, to use the shorthand of their *Anti-Oedipus* (1977). The 'body without organs' is the "figureless and foundationless" foundation (in Guattari's terms) of *any* drive or desire, and so doesn't exclude fascist and capitalist drives, rather it acts as attractor and platform for those as well. Artaud has often been confusing on a political level, and many of the political appropriations of Artaud in the 1960's were oblique to their source, to say the least. When the students occupied the

L'Odéon Théâtre in May, 1968, one of their slogans was “They have even stolen Artaud!” L'Odéon's director at the time, Jean-Louis Barrault, was a close associate of Artaud's and could have told them how misdirected this was. One of the most viable theatrical pursuits stemming from Artaud would have to be Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theater, though their anarchist-pacifist agenda wouldn't have found much support from Artaud. Similarly, Carolee Schneemann's ‘kinetic painting’ with its joyous assertion of female sexuality would likely horrify Artaud, one of its primary inspirations.

Yet Artaud's critique of representation was so adamant and so far-reaching it strikes one as far more appropriate to today's era of Google Earth and omnipresent digital infrastructures and links (Benjamin Bratton's ‘The Stack’) than it was in the 1940's. There have been a series of recent exhibitions and studies exploring this new ‘animism’ of our media environment where images and disembodied powers act. According to pharmaceutical activist and publisher Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, this connects to the prevalence of “capitalist sorcery” that require counter-sorcery in response. With Artaud's emphasis on any ‘culture’ being a matter of its translation through the nervous system of the body a political dimension in all this emerges from Artaud that was not present before, just one aspect of how some of his most previously outrageous aspects find a new home in the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In regard to ‘cruelty,’ this is a thread of consistency between the ‘early’ Artaud before his journey to the Tarahumaras, and ‘final’ Artaud 1945-1948. At the end of his life Artaud is still scheming and obsessed with what a proper Theater of cruelty would consist of. Artaud wrote the manifestoes of *The Theater and Its Double* before his trip to Mexico, but when it appeared in France in 1938 Artaud was already in the asylums. In the ‘Third Letter’ of the chapter “Letters on Language” in *The Theater and Its Double* he responds to the many critics of the term ‘cruelty’ – it wasn't a matter of “sadism” or “bloody gestures,” Artaud wrote, “but on the contrary, a pure and detached feeling, a veritable movement of the mind based on the gestures of life itself...” Artaud argued, “Life cannot help exercising some blind rigor that carries with it all its conditions, otherwise it wouldn't be life...I have therefore said ‘cruelty’ as I might have said ‘life’ or ‘necessity’.” He writes elsewhere of ‘cruelty’ as any determinable or rigorous action. So any birth is a moment of cruelty, as is death. Yet the roots of any ‘culture’ are quite dark, macabre and ‘cruel’ in the usual, bloody sense for Artaud; he admired Seneca as a theater of cruelty in the ancient world, and ardently identified with the 3<sup>rd</sup> century mad Roman boy-king Heliogabalus (in a 1934 book very important to Deleuze and Guattari).

Such was the force of theater, according to Artaud in the 1930's, that a symbolic death or crime could have a much greater impact “than the same crime, realized,” that is, than if a person was actually murdered on the stage. This sounds unbelievably ambitious, and it is, but I see a contemporary

corollary in Philippe Grandrieux films, where the suggested or anticipated violence packs more menace and fear than any violence you may see on the screen.

Artaud was searching for a still extant, viable Theater of cruelty, and with the Tarahumaras believed he had found one. It certainly has a number of 'bad trip' aspects, but to conclude these are the only ones would be to deny any validity of what Artaud discovered there. The filmmaker Raymonde Carasco followed Artaud's footsteps and like him became initiated into the Tarahumara rites; she made eleven films with the Tarahumaras, 1978-2003, beautiful studies of rhythm and gesture, part experimental cinema, part ethnography. (Her Tarahumara journals, *Dans le bleu du ciel*, were published in France in 2014). She found Artaud's notion of the 'body without organs' a very faithful transcription of Tarahumara religion and thought. Others, such as Sylvère Lotringer, were surprised by the accuracy of Artaud's descriptions of their ceremonies. The percussive beats, the screams and chants of *To have done with the judgment of god* were very much inspired from the Tarahumaras, although he's not trying to replicate the form of their rites so much as the transfiguring power they produce. Artaud called that last radio broadcast a "mini-model" of a Theater of cruelty. This is remarkable since nowhere does Artaud point to something he's done as having attained his goals, quite the contrary. These 'final' works are the fruit of Artaud's transformation that began with the Tarahumaras. They are produced despite the horror of the asylums, where Artaud's life became its own Theater of cruelty. The drawings become a kind of laboratory for the re-formation, re-constitution of Antonin Artaud, though not one, as he writes, of "the reintegration of a sensitivity misled." It is a new creation of a "true body."

Joseph Nechvatal: One more word on his drawings before turning to his sensational audio art radio project, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu* (*To have done with the judgment of god*) that Sub Rosa published on CD and the merits of his general attack on representation. By the way, stimulated by your book, I have also returned to the recording of Artaud reading his 1947 text *Alienation et magie noire* (*Alienation and Black Magic*) that was published by Lunapark.

Artaud draws as a counter-spell his own head and face a good deal and other human heads. In doing so, he usually adheres to the tropes indispensable to the comprehension striven for in typical drawn representation. The viewer of his drawings (that were framed and exhibited in 1947 at Galerie Pierre - where Artaud made his last public appearance) is thus mostly excluded from his goal of ruining representation. Held at bay as it were, and invulnerable to a true ruin of representation through the conventions of framing, centering and perspective. My take-away from your book is that a truer ruin of representation entails more ambient and simultaneous impulses than Artaud himself provides - after all, the casting of spells is representational thinking *par excellence*. Needed is something all-over which

returns framed and centered perspective to its rightful place as contingent instrumental convention. This is really a question of anti-phallogocentric form that asks for a more active and continuously searching situation rather than content at the level of practice and reception. Hence Jay, do you think any current anti-conventional representational aesthetics of the virtual would mean working *beyond* Artaud's theatrically cruel boundaries? And if so, how?

Jay Murphy: Yes, one would think Artaud's approach would lead to complete non-representationalism. He has his reasons, however, for retaining the figure in his drawings while he scarifies, re-arranges, obliterates and replaces it. In his little essay "The Human Face" (1947) he refers to how one of Van Gogh's self-portraits "renders null and void all the attempts of abstract paintings which can be made after him," as well of "the most specious secrets in which abstract or nonfigurative painting can delight." As usual, what he says about Van Gogh applies as much or more to his own work. "There will be hell to pay," Artaud wrote of his own drawings, "for whoever considers them works of art, works of aesthetic simulation of reality." It may well seem a contradiction to allow such work to be shown in an art gallery as Artaud's comments on the postwar Parisian art world were coruscating. Furthermore, some of Artaud's last work will seem to make moot the entire notion of audience.

What I feel evokes Artaud are works that highlight the virtual operations or components of any 'experience.' This would include not only works that do evoke catastrophe or loss of conventional perspective or 'self' - like Gary Hill's *Dervish* (1993-1995), *Reflex Chamber* (1996), or *Impressions d'Afrique* (2003), among others - but also works that do not feature the cataclysm one associates with Artaud. I can't imagine Toni Dove is attempting to uproot and transform audience/participants the way Artaud hopes, yet her *Lucid Possession* (2013) features a "schizoid chorus from the real and virtual worlds," so her narrative in this advanced, interactive performance/cinema has Artaudian themes. *Lucid Possession* is a ghost story where the principal character is invaded by presences; similarly, in her *Spectropia* (2007-2008) the noir/sci-fi themes include time-travel and telepathy. *Lucid Possession* utilizes robotic screens, motion sensing, laser technologies and live VJing, among other elements, that one could embrace as a technologically-enhanced theater of cruelty. And in her artist's statement for *Lucid Possession* Dove asks the preeminently Artaudian question of "where does the body end?" Such works are multi-directional and depend on the gesture and bodily movement of their audience-participator, and so are decentered in a manner perhaps that Artaud's drawings cannot be; despite what Artaud called the "unsticking of the retina," a sliding before the work that could engulf the entire body.

I find some of the most successful Artaudian approaches in the films and installations of Philippe Grandrieux, whether in *La Vie nouvelle* (2002) or *Malgré la nuit* (2015) and the *Unrest* trilogy (2012-2017).

It is not simply a matter of shock-value, or utilization of the scream, contortions of the face, real and symbolic violence, the dance, location of the psychosis of our time in sexuality and the body, which are all present. It is that Grandrieux is so effective in dissolving subject/object relations that one must navigate his films through the images alone or viscerally through the body, which implies another, double body. This speech of the body through motion and gesture, all other avenues being closed (sound is a profoundly significant element, and there are songs even if speech is often futile or foreclosed), is a consequence of an annihilation of metaphor – this is a tremendous Artaudian achievement. One must participate in the film through joining a labyrinth of bodies, yet the body remains inaccessible for all that. Grandrieux’ “new life” seems to suggest inventing another body in Hell – as Artaud did in the asylums. The character of Mélanie in *La Vie nouvelle* is nothing so much as new Eurydice.

Artaud’s influence has been so vast – from lettrism in France, Butoh in Japan, concrete poetry movements in Brazil, aside from paintings by artists as disparate as Nancy Spero, Georg Baselitz and Julian Schnabel, and in alternative theater/performance – but these I’ve mentioned appear as really promising extensions, and they are often only possible due to new or digital technologies.

Joseph Nechvatal: Artaud’s influence is not in doubt and his cruel attitude towards abstract or nonfigurative art is intriguing. Your explanation made me think of what Gilles Deleuze said in *Francis Bacon: Logique de la sensation* (1981) about abstract painting: that “it has pure hands, but it doesn’t have hands.” But perhaps more important for the future of art is how Artaud insists on linking the imagination to notions of impossible spells. I think that even though in his essay “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” Jacques Derrida describes how Artaud’s theory may be seen as impossible in terms of the established structure of Western thought, this is precisely why current art theory, with its vital connections to spells, the speculative, the imaginary, the virtual, and the impossible should be re-placed in parallel position to Artaud’s body without organs hypothesis. This is particularly so when artists put themselves inside the virtual way of art making, where one experiences constant preludes to the work’s fulfillment. As with Artaud, the artist’s will and desire play with and against an impossible vastness that can always divert immediacy, thus stimulating desires which affect the state of nerves and minds.

But in his statement on Van Gogh, Artaud seems to be suggesting that such nervy desires involve a prying-loose from former familiarities, and hence is a state where art itself is attacked and opposed. Is that right? I sort of hope not, as the way I see it is that art and the artist are required more than ever as a way of overcome the alienation felt with the expanded boundaries of virtual presentation and representation. Perhaps only the artificiality of art extols the operational possibility of realizing in the physical world imaginative challenges needed for gaining familiarity with those vast virtual concepts.

Also, isn't it true that Artaud proposed that art must become a means of influencing the human organism and directly altering consciousness by engaging the audience in ritualistic-like activities involving excess?

Jay Murphy: The body without organs does involve a kind of infinite suspension. With Artaud, it is part of an ecstatic wager where one gets the sense that this body cannot ever be completed. This is similar to the earliest treatment of BwO in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, where the only complete body without organs would be a dead body, its orifices totally closed. It is also typical of Artaud's spells that he is waiting for their result, and constantly testing which ones work and which ones don't, so your comment concerning "constant preludes to the work's fulfillment" is very much to the point. But I don't think Artaud sees his spells as impossible. Rather, for him it is how and why *anything* happens. Artaud shared the belief, extremely common in the millennia of 'traditional' societies, that one only dies due to malevolent magick. Otherwise, one would live forever. Artaud's notion of art is tied to transformative action, much as it was for most of human history. A parallel in modern and postmodern art would be William Burroughs' definition of writing as "making things happen." Like Artaud, Burroughs means this quite literally, in that it changes reality or creates an effective alternate reality. (Burroughs, a member of the Order of the Thanateros, was buried with its chaos star ring on his finger).

Artaud stays faithful to Dada and early surrealism in that art-as-institution is to be absolutely opposed. Artaud, at the end of his life, said that he doesn't mind being called a surrealist and that he was always a surrealist, except for the short period of time when he was in a group that called itself that! He writes about Van Gogh as a "marvelous musician," as well as practitioner of "pure painting," yet Van Gogh partakes of "direct creation" that dwarfs even the power of nature for Artaud. The artist-as-shaman comparison that comes in and out of vogue, given its domestication among other reasons, is another kind of "pitiful terminology" for what Artaud presents. There are many 'art worlds,' but the consumer cycles of the high-luxury business are simply irrelevant to this. Bataille's path was different, but his advocacy of *le grand surréalisme* in the 1940's is analogous in that it suggests a surrealism without or beyond 'works,' which cannot be appropriated as such.

Joseph Nechvatal: As virtual space places us in the position of indeterminate unknowing, I see how Artaud helps disable previous emphasis on the false objectivism of representation accorded to cultural production. In the virtual condition of arduous inter-relational questioning, what is clarified in terms of the ruin of representation is the human idiosyncratic ability to imaginatively convert absence into presence.

In the book you suggest that Artaud foresaw and anticipated the cultural rupture (or bifurcation if you prefer) that occurred between the capture technologies of the 20th century (representational art, film, photography and video) and the far more virtual and elastic technology of the computer and its language codes. For you, does Artaud's virtual body aid current culture by pushing the underlying assumptions of excess inherent in the virtual into the flesh, thus challenging artists to face up to the radical implications of that assumption in their body of work? I assume so, but don't you think that what is important to Artaud's ruin of representation was already instigated by Arthur Rimbaud's poetic formula based on the derangement of the senses? In Rimbaud's poems, we are already essentially challenged to find the virtual within vast and shifting non-representational sensations of the body's sense organs. Right?

Jay Murphy: Rimbaud is a very significant and relevant precursor and also, for different reasons, is Comte de Lautréamont. Artaud has a 'peer group' he often refers to, including Rimbaud and Lautréamont, Baudelaire, François Villon, Edgar Allen Poe, Friedrich Hölderlin, Gérard de Nerval, and sometimes others. There is a Baudelairean "voyage" aspect to cyberspace, though as Rimbaud pointed out, Baudelaire remained a conservative writer in some aspects given his respect for traditional French prosody. Baudelaire never broke the "eggshells of being" in Jean-Paul Sartre's awkward phrase. Baudelaire and Poe had already filled out to a great extent Artaud's theme that greater insight was possibly gained from degradation and sickness, insomnia and lucid dreams, than in health. Nerval's psychotic episodes were profoundly mythic ones, as certain periods of Artaud's 'schizophrenia' were likewise 'classic,' in that they were travels through history that contained assumptions of historic personas. Lautréamont's howls, especially directed toward the nuclear family and family-like institutions throughout society, were also designed to be effective as unrepeatabe gestures, as Gaston Bachelard stressed in his book on him. Artaud includes Nietzsche in this group now and then, and their stances strike me often as very close. But for Nietzsche the "aesthetic simulation of reality" was necessary for human beings to bear existence at all, not a condition to be abolished.

Artaud's Theater of cruelty does bank on excess, but I stress the constructivist nature of the body without organs that is missed by looking at Artaud and his convolutions strictly through a lens of excess. Artaud claims some success: in December, 1947 he writes, "I have made/a body." Artaud in the 'late' work has generated a new substrate of being, which leaves behind various debris, *gris gris*, drawings, writings and sound works arguably more significant than his achievements during the short-lived participation with the surrealists or even the theater manifestoes. It is this body without organs

that Félix Guattari later generalizes as “the continual point of emergence of all forms of creativity” in an era of “planetary computerization.”

Joseph Nechvatal: In my view, Artaud’s logocentric defect or deficiency (that I cited earlier) exactly illustrates what is wrong with his method of supposedly ruining representation in sound art and in drawing. As Artaud suggested, systems of representations operate by establishing a fixed standard as the norm or model. I think he stayed too close to these models. In that sense, Artaud’s audio art piece *To have done with the judgment of god*, regardless of its ground-breaking treatment of the scream and glossolalia and some pretty far out sound effects for the time, fails to effect a ruin of representation. He should have used higher degrees of excessive superimposition to produce a lavishness that bids us to open our ears and eyes to the nomadic nomos of wandering assemblages and their molten distribution. Do you agree with me Jay, or am I being too hard on Artaud?

Jay Murphy: *To have done with the judgment of god* has evoked all sorts of responses. Artaud’s ambitions for it were vast. He predicted the broadcast “would connect with certain organic points of life, a work which causes the entire nervous system to feel illuminated as if by a miner’s cap, with vibrations and consonances that invite one to corporeally emerge.” Artaud thought that the working class people that tuned in were among the few who could understand what he suffered in the asylums because they too had been exploited. Artaud wanted to engulf the listener. Though his disappointment in it being banned cannot be overestimated, by all accounts it was devastating, there is a sense in Artaud’s use of the scream that its impacted power no longer needs an audience. Exercises with screams were a major part of Artaud’s work with actors in the 1930’s, and it is a remarkably honed weapon by the end of his life. The scream becomes the ultimate in what Artaud called his “search for fecality” – an expression or value of expulsion that is not excremental, which cannot be located in any ‘interior’ or ‘exterior.’ This self-propulsion, beyond what Artaud termed the oral-anal canal, also resides on a border of all dualities: including eros/thanatos, life/death. This form of non-duality had its existence, in Guy Rossolato’s terms, as that which “by means of the single thought incarnate in the infinite instant of passage within the circumscribed immensity of the theatre: a scream.” Artaud’s aim was for a re-materialization of his body, and a taking back of his voice that was silenced for nine years in the asylums. In that sense, it is a success. There are shades of it in early Butoh’s insistence on gestures that hang in the air in a grasp of immortality (its refusal, especially in Tatsumi Hijikata’s performance, of repertory), and in the later work of Jerzy Grotowski that consists of excruciating ‘spiritual’ exercises for the performer with no audience. But it is with various new technologies that Artaud’s ambitions for a veritable disorder and engulfment can be most realized.

Joseph Nechvatal: Thank you Jay for this marvelously rich book and for the stimulating conversation. I end our exchange with a quote of Antonin Artaud's from his "Manifesto in Clear Language" that I always find relevant and nourishing: "In the realm of the affective imponderable, the image provided by my nerves takes the form of the highest intellectuality, which I refuse to strip of its quality of intellectuality."