

# Specters of Artaud

## Language and the Arts in the 1950s

19 September - 17 December 2012

*Specters of Artaud. Language and the Arts in the 1950s* is the first exhibition to situate dissident surrealist Antonin Artaud's production—in theater, cinema, drawing, and for radio—as a crucial legacy for understanding artistic practices at midcentury. By including varied means of artistic expression, the exhibition looks at how Artaud's desire to move beyond the confines of language, understood as both writing and speech, lives on in the work of artists similarly concerned with questions of language, the body, and spectator participation. To date, Artaud's importance for the arts has been largely overlooked owing to the centrality of neo-Dada in the exhibition and historiography of postwar art. The present exhibition thus hopes to shed new light both on Artaud and on his multifaceted reception in the postwar moment.

The visual artists, poets, writers, and composers in *Specters of Artaud* are drawn from three primary contexts: France, the United States, and Brazil. As a result, the exhibition proposes no "School of Artaud." Rather the exhibition charts his work's appropriation, recontextualization, and translation, all of which form part of a broader intellectual history and series of transatlantic exchanges. *Specters of Artaud* is organized according to thematic sections that explore concerns central to Artaud's life and his legacy: from the reinvention of language to his critique of the psychiatric institution.



## From Letters to Bodily Sounds

At the time Artaud produced *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* [To Have Done with the Judgment of God, 1948], with its fragments of raw music, several artists, poets, and composers were reinventing their own art by emphasizing the relation between language and the body. Founded by Isidore Isou alongside Gabriel Pomerand in 1946, lettrism whittled down poetry to the letter in order to reinvest poetic language, both written and spoken, with new signifying potential. The lettrists explored the aural dimensions of language through poetry performances and systematically interrogated written sign systems, even developing notation for bodily sounds. With their *poésie physique* [physical poetry], Gil Wolman, François Dufrêne, and Jean-Louis Brau turned to the exclusive use of corporeal sounds that interrupt rational language through a concerted desublimation.

## Indeterminacy: *Theater Piece #1*

Before the Living Theatre championed Artaud's work and before the publication of the English translation of *Le Théâtre et son double* [The Theater and Its Double] by M. C. Richards (1958), Artaud was the subject of a robust transatlantic exchange between Pierre Boulez, John Cage, David Tudor, and Richards. In the summer of 1952 at Black Mountain College, Richards gave a reading of her translation-in-progress, which inspired Cage's *Theater Piece #1*. Generally described as the first happening, the work maintains mythic status because of its scant archival documentation. The exhibition traces the importance of Artaud for *Theater Piece #1* through the presentation of works by Robert Rauschenberg and Franz Kline in addition to extensive documentation, including letters, photographs, program notes, and musical scores.

## Concrete Impurities

Under the influence of Artaud, Swedish poet Öyvind Fahlström published the first concrete poetry manifesto in 1953. In São Paulo in 1952, Augusto de Campos, his brother Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari formed the Noigandres group. These poets were interested in the efficiency of communication, yet their poetry reveals impurities through redoubled meanings and bodily references. In neighboring Rio de Janeiro, poet and critic Ferreira Gullar was reading Artaud. The encounter would further Gullar's visual deconstruction of discourse, and he would eventually spatialize language and physically activate the reader in works such as the *poemas espaciais* [spatial poems]. Artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica similarly explored the work of art's embodied reception. By the mid-1970s, Oiticica even claimed to be the "son of Nietzsche and stepson of Artaud."

In the 1950s Artaud's theories intersected with a burgeoning field of interdisciplinary practices that developed alternative models of modernism at midcentury. By incorporating Artaud's ideas into their work, these artists demonstrate the importance of rethinking the history of art and the place of Artaud's specter within it.

Kaira M. Cabañas and Frédéric Acquaviva  
Exhibition curators

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### Museum hours

Monday to Saturday

from 10:00 a.m.

to 9:00 p.m.

Sundays from

10:00 a.m.

to 7:00 p.m.\*

(\*From 2:30 pm

onwards only the

Collection galleries

can be visited)

Closed Tuesdays

Galleries close

15 minutes

prior to Museum

closing

### Guided visit

September 19,

7:00 p.m.

### Seeing and Hearing

#### Artaud's Specters

Itinerary with Kaira M.

Cabañas and Frédéric

Acquaviva

Anyone wishing to

participate must register in

advance:

programasculturales2@

museoreinasofia.es

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