



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Antonin Artaud's 'decisive transfusion': From theatre to mathematics*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/102200/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Salazar Sutil, N orcid.org/0000-0001-8514-2873 (2010) Antonin Artaud's 'decisive transfusion': From theatre to mathematics. *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 14 (4). pp. 119-124. ISSN 1352-8165

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13528160903553061>

© Taylor & Francis Ltd 2009. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Performance Research* on 30 Mar 2010, available online:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13528160903553061>

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Antonin Artaud's 'decisive transfusion': from theatre to mathematics

By Nicolás Salazar-Sutil

ABSTRACT

This article explores a notion of the theatre that should make possible, in Antonin Artaud's words, a 'decisive transfusion of matter by mind'. I begin by contending that whilst Artaud refused to treat the body and the mind as separated entities, he spoke of a 'latent disorder' whereby thought and bodiliness are in continuous conflict. Although the suggestion of an alchemical transfusion that would unify body and mind is an odd and perhaps perplexing one, what is more perplexing still is Artaud's idea that the empty body would have to be filled by an essence such as mathematics. This paper seeks to understand why Artaud turned to mathematical images to explain the kind of transfusion of matter he had in mind for his alchemical theatre. Much of this paper deals with images Artaud conjures up whereby theatrical experience is analogous with a blood transfusion. My aim is to explain this image as a metaphorical link, or 'site of passage', from that which Artaud saw as the corrupted materiality of the body, to the abstract, or trans-corporeal, as part of an alchemical theatre that sought to trans-form and trans-fuse the actor into a coded or reflective bodily mathematics.

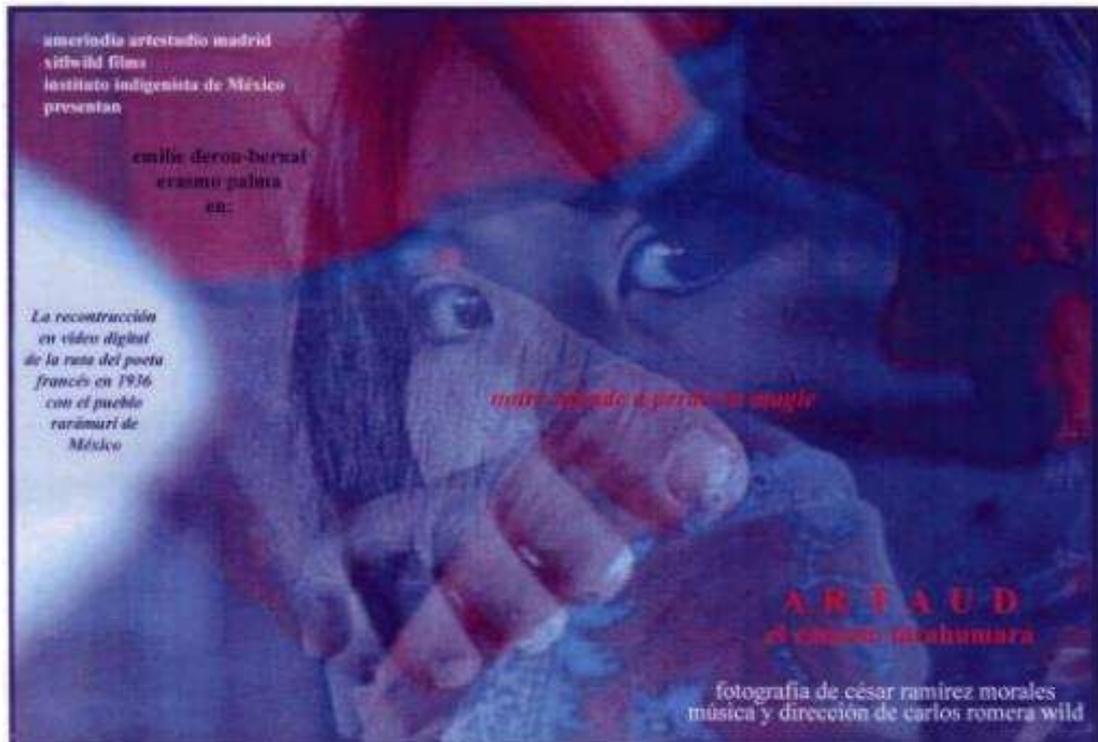
Key words: Artaud, theatre, transfusion, mathematics

Introduction

'One does not separate the mind from the body' (1958, p 87) wrote French poet, actor, philosopher Antonin Artaud. In many ways, this statement encapsulates Artaud's vision of the theatre as an event that moves away from Classical body-mind, audience-spectator dichotomies, thus providing a 'site of passage' to embodied or 'blooded thought' (Blau 1982b). Many of Artaud's preoccupations with the nature of theatre thus revolve round the question of creating a meta-language or meta-system that may transcend body-mind divisions. What followed was a type of theatre that, as Artaud learned from his artistic mentor Alfred Jarry, could be 'transcendentally beautiful- not trans the superlative, but trans a departure' (Jarry 2001, p 23). Thus theatre provides for Artaud a very decisive medium, a departure from one state of being to another. This is why, right across Artaud's oeuvre, one of the most persistent images and analogies he uses is that of blood: a substance which continuously circulates and mediates.

In order to tease out the notion of an alchemical transfusion in Artaud's philosophy, I will concentrate on two short essays Artaud wrote in 1936 following his journey to the country of the Tarahumara Indians, located in the Mexican State of Chihuahua, North of Mexico City. My argument is that whilst the surrealism in the landscape described by Artaud may be partly derived from the fact that he was suffering from withdrawal syndrome at the time, his depiction of a philosophy of transcendental signs encoded in the mountains and the shapes of the Peyote Dance ultimately provide an alibi for a very particular vision of the theatre as an alchemical fusion of body and thought. In searching for the essence of indigenous Mexico, Artaud was embarking not only on a journey of self-discovery; furthermore, he was looking for a case-study to justify his belief in a trans-cultural process by means of which matter could be turned into eternal content.

Years after his experience with the Tarahumara, Artaud explained that the reason for going to Mexico had been to find a race of people who could follow him in his ideas (1988, p 452). More than an idealistic utopia, however, Mexico provided an escape, the first of many asylums that would house a man in search for an irreparable cure to the ailment of being. In many of his writings, Artaud suggested that this healing could only come about in the way of cruel theatre: a medical, ritual, surgical, therapeutic and psychotropic operation whereby old blood would be tested, shed, and ultimately cleansed. What is perhaps most surprising about Artaud's notion of an alchemical transfusion is his plea for a type of sacred mathematics to which the theatre should aim ritualistically and almost religiously. Thus, the project Artaud had in mind was a passage or transfusion from mere recording organisms to bodies without organs, from corporeality to trans-corporeality, where body and mind would finally be redeemed. In this alchemical stage, acting bodies and mathematical bodies would fuse into the same thing.



Cover for Carlos Romera Wild's documentary *Artaud: el Camino Tarahumara* (2004), Amerindia A.M/ Xitlwild Films + CDI México (Courtesy of Carlos Romera Wild)

Theatre as transfusion

In many ways, Artaudian theatre was an act of blooded thought: an almost impossible coming together of opposites. It enabled, in Artaud's words, a step towards the '*decisive transfusion of matter by mind*' (1958, p 52). Artaud's 'performance of blood' (O'Bryan 2005, p 95), was a quasi-surgical and ritual operation by means of which the organ-less body could, as Derrida notes in his one of his articles on Artaud, perform a sense of lack through which the body becomes absent from itself, passing itself off, and taking itself for, the mind (2001, p 234). In the same way that the 'thieving god was born to pass itself off as me' in a system of imitation and endless repetition (quoted in Derrida 2001, p 293), the body could in fact become the mind in a decisive transfusion. In order to usher this cruel theatre of consubstantiation, theatre had to resemble a surgical opera(tion). This is why Artaud purposefully compared the experience of theatre-going with going to the surgeon or the dentist (1988, p 157). For Artaud, theatre was a 'transplantation out of essence that reveals the abysses of the exterior interior' (1995, p 55). Theatre showed bodies without organs, feverishly trying to be filled with new blood and new essences. In short, what Artaud imagined for his new theatre was an intensification of consciousness and an exposed lucidity in all its naked and 'emblooded realization' (Blau 2002, p 149).

The vitalising power of blood, and the transfusional power of this performance, runs through a catalogue of works for the theatre in which Artaud insists upon the need for a ritual/ surgical operation. Theatre, Artaud concluded, should be as localised as 'the circulation of the blood in the arteries' (1958, p 92). Artaud defied his spectators to participate in this

'transfer of blood'; this 'transit of a superior action' whereby 'the violence of blood is placed at the service of the violence of thought' (83). His short play *A Spurt of Blood*, and his unfinished scenarios *The Philosopher's Stone* and *The Conquest of Mexico* are perhaps the clearest indications of Artaud's fascination with blood as a catalyst for a supremely energised and transfusional performance. At a less philosophical level, the aim of Artaudian theatre was also to provide a new bloodstream that would revitalise a degenerated and debilitated Western culture. Alchemical theatre would endow Western culture with a 'spiritual means of decanting and transfusing matter' (1958, p 52). More specifically, the alchemical spectacle Artaud speaks about in *The Theatre and Its Double* would be the violent injection of a metaphysical substance into the bloodstream of actors and spectators. The question is: if the purpose was to make a transfusion that would elide the difference between body and content, what exactly was this metaphysical substance that would provide the crucial passage to trans-corporeality?



Free Theatre's production of *The Philosopher's Stone* (1998), Christchurch, New Zealand (Courtesy of Peter Falkenberg)

Artaud was not convinced that Western society had yet reached an ultimate paroxysm of blood, which is why total theatre was called for to trigger the bloodshed or plague that would lead to the ultimate healing. The question that we must ask ourselves next, and which is often posed when trying to fathom the impossibilities of Artaudian theatre, is how this transfusion can come about? Furthermore, what role does the mathematising of the body, the transubstantiation of mathematical abstraction into bodily concreteness, play

in this violent passage of substances? How crucial is the embodiment (or embloodment) of sacred numerologies in Artaud's somewhat cabbalistic and Pythagorean vision of the theatre?

The mathematics of the Theatre of Cruelty

Artaud's observation of the importance of mathematics in performance provides the crucial methodological clue to his alchemical theatre, and one which is hardly ever discussed by the many commentators of Artaud's life and works. For Artaud, the ritual bloodshed in the theatre of cruelty was neither random nor spontaneous, but a 'calculated dream' (Derrida 2001, p 305)- a rigorous intellectuality and 'mathematical meticulousness of gesture' (Blau 1982a, p 82)- even a mathematics in the midst of trance (Blau 2002, p 147). Whilst in Mexico, Artaud was convinced that the theatricalisation of many truths that modern society no longer lived by could be revived by drawing inspiration from mathematics and sacred numerology. Inspired by the rigorous stylisation of Balinese dance, Artaud called for a 'reflective mathematics' or 'prodigious mathematical spectacle' (1958, p 58-9), that would achieve his unification of body and mind. Artaud spoke of this new mathematical performance not only in relation to Balinese dance, however, but also in his own theatre adaptation of Shelley's *The Cenci*, where he purposely aimed for 'clock-work precision', and a gyration of 'mathematical entrances and exits' that created on stage the conditions of a 'strict spatial geometry' (1989, p 149-150). 'To know that the soul has a corporeal expression,' wrote Artaud shortly before leaving for Mexico, 'permits the actor to unite with his soul from the other side, and to discover its being by mathematical analogies' (1958, p 135). Instead of the 'sterile mathematics' of facts, statistics and probability theory, Artaud sought an 'enchanted mathematical meticulousness' (1958, p 57), a 'sacred' and 'reflective mathematics that controls everything' (58). The mathematised body of the actor was no longer a mere declaration of its own controlling and metrical rationality, but a signature of a metaphysical identity, a body that was both concrete and abstract, both real and imaginary, both form and content.

Mathematical code languages in 'Voyage to the Land of the Tarahumara'

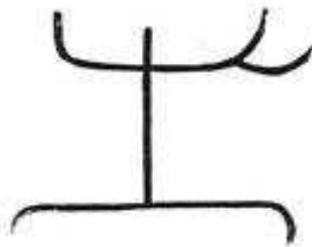
Shortly before setting out to Mexico City on January 1936, Artaud wrote that he intended on going on a 'voyage to the land of speaking blood' (1988, p 353). He hoped to witness in 'Red-Earth Mexico' the bloody spectacles of pre-Columbian civilisations. He longed for an ancient Mexican culture to cut through the vice of European theatre, making the Western stage an open, bleeding wound (Pizzato 1998, p 89). Hence Artaud was not only in search of a theatre of 'magic' and 'divination'; rather, he was seeking to subvert European rationality and harness shamanistic forces against his own culture. Not only was Artaud distancing himself physically from a culture he had already renounced emotionally and psychically; moreover, he was willing, as he suggests in his own writings, to serve his own 'perpetual crucifixion' in order to give up his own European-ness (1988, p 383).

In his lecture *Man Against Destiny*, delivered in 1936 at the Universidad de Mexico, Artaud further argued that Europe had dismembered itself with her separate sciences creating a labyrinth of 'divided knowledge' (1988, p 359), where 'everything is reduced to numbers' (361). According to this view, the scission between body and mind condemned modern subjectivity to fracture and ailment, resulting in an analytical process whereby lives, bodies and bodily parts were continuously being cut up into smaller and smaller units to the point of becoming numbers. For this reason, the forces Artaud saw dormant in Mexico gave birth to a different type of forgotten numerology.

There are no official records on where or how Artaud travelled to the land of the Tarahumara. Whatever truth may or may not be contained in Artaud's voyage, Artaud left Mexico City in August 1936. Upon his return in early October, he published an article on the Tarahumara experience in the Mexican newspaper *El Nacional*, before setting sail for France at the end of that month. The text, entitled *The Mountain of Signs*, opens on the unwieldy landscape of the Tarahumara Sierra, where Artaud sees crosses and massacred bodies everywhere he turns.

I may have been born with a tormented body, as much a fake as the immense mountain; but a body whose obsessions are useful: and I noticed in the mountain that it is useful to have the obsession of counting. There was not a shadow that I did not count. [...] It was often by adding up shadows that I found my way back to strange centres. (1988, p 380)

The battle of consciousness, which has left so many dead bodies strewn on the primeval field, is engaged at the level of an obsession for counting. The repetition of the mathematical and geometrical signs on the mountains leads Artaud to the conclusion that there is a secret Pythagorean understanding amongst the Tarahumara. The repetition of the symbol of the cross is likewise interpreted as a proof of a religious pan-culturalism, which provides Artaud with an alibi for his theory of a supra-corporeal theatrical experience.



A Tarahumara Cross: Artaud later read these signs as proof of pseudo-Christianity amongst the Tarahumara. The symbol is in fact a Medicine figure (Carl Hulmholtz, Unknown Mexico)

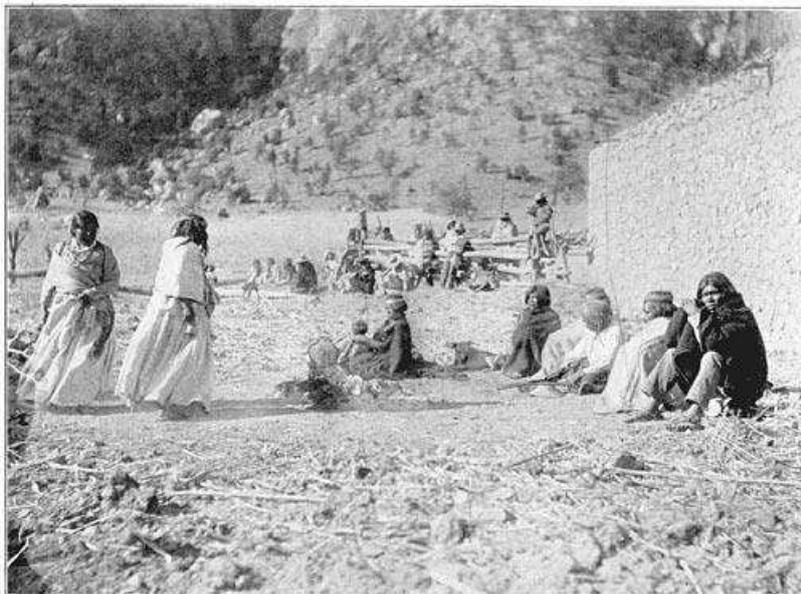
There is in the Cabbala a music of Numbers, and this music, which reduces the chaos of the material world to its principles, explains by a kind of awesome mathematics how Nature is ordered and how she directs the birth of the forms she pulls out of chaos. And everything I

saw seemed to correspond to a number. The statues, the forms, the shadows always presented the recurring numbers 3, 4, 7, 8. (381)

Artaud explains that whilst these forms may be taken for granted, their repetition is far from natural. What is even less natural, according to Artaud, is that these mountain signs are repeated by the Tarahumara in their rituals. In *The Peyote Dance*, written shortly after his return to France, Artaud explains how, in witnessing the hideous symbolism of the Tarahumara landscape, he underwent a cataclysmic feeling that pointed to a sacred mathematical language contained in ritual.

These dances are not the result of chance but obey the same secret mathematics, the same concern for the subtle relation of Numbers which governs the entire Sierra region. (381)

Artaud is almost willing to accept that the Tarahumara are their mathematical landscape, even while they perform it (Stone Peters 2002, p 239). And because this philosophy is dependent upon a profound awareness of numbers, Artaud assumes that the Tarahumara must live to confront the endlessness of uncountable infinity. This procrastination elicits in Artaud 'a terrible sensation of loss, of a void to be filled, of an event that miscarries' (1988, p 384). And inasmuch as it re-establishes lost relationships through geometrical gestures, the dance seems 'strangely cut off the spatial perspective' (388). There is a moment of transfusion here from the metaphysical to the concrete and back. The difficulty Artaud had to face was that mathematics seemed to have no end, and, like the numbers he counted so obsessively in the mountains, it can take the mind up to infinity. So what does this transfusional dance recover from total absence, what word lost in an infinity of Numbers? What do the shamanic incantations retrieve from the mystery toward which the Hikuli or Peyote Dance is aimed? Neither the geometrical arrangement of cries, tones, steps, chants can reveal to Artaud what lies hidden beneath, which Artaud calls the Principal (391).



Tarahumara Women Dancing Hikuli or Peyote Dance at Guajochoic Station. From Carl Lumholtz's *Unknown Mexico* Vol. I, 1902

Artaud may have seen in the mountains and in the ritual dance a magic sequence, a count that suggested a transfusion from the concrete to the metaphysical and back. But his feeling of dispossession exposed a man incapable of comprehending that Principal and eternal content. Artaud returned a disappointed man to France. The signs of the Tarahumara had ultimately condemned him to his incapacity to make sense. This is why Artaud concluded his description of the Peyote Dance with a caveat: nothing can be brought back from this experience. He remained blocked from the lost mystery by his own modern body and the culture it carries. Artaud had to accept that the decisive transfusion had painfully eluded him.

Conclusion

Deleuze and Guattari read Les Tarahumara as Artaud's 'expression of the multiplicity of fusion and fusionability' (2004, p 195). Nature is the locking up of flows into bodies, a series of constrictions of flow into the materiality that 'anchors us in this, our world' (195). As we have seen, Artaud's art consists in bringing poetic expression to that very same crystallisation, whilst suggesting a complete fusion with certain modes of being- a fusion of emotion and thought (Esslin 1976, p 25). The Nature that Artaud visualises in the Mexican Sierra is an endless combat between the liquidities of light and the coagulated forms of the rock and the earth, bodies and substances in perennial conflict. Culture and nature collide. Artaud finds himself in the middle, incapable of making them fuse, sensing that, whilst there is a multiple fusionability of things, the more anchored one is to culture, the harder it is to perceive what lies beyond the cultural crust.

In his book *Certain Fragments*, performance theorist Tim Etchells argues that theatrical experience is in our blood- which is why we must transfuse it, clean it, test it (1999, p 96). Herbert Blau echoes this sentiment when he observes that at least in an ideal sense, the past always needs blood donors, which is why the theatre is a means of transfusion (1982a, p 9). Elin Diamond goes further, arguing that the theatre is not only a means of transfusion, but the means of transfusion, insofar as it resuscitates what theatre invented in the first place (2003, p 5). Despite these evocative analogies of theatre and performance as an exchangeable bloodstream, the same question remains: how can this exchange take place between performers and actors, between the abstract and the concrete? How can cultures fuse, and in what way does performance expose the multiplicity of fusion and fusionability of matter as the ultimate zero, that nothingness into which all numbers fit? For Artaud, the question is not a rhetorical one, but one which has to be embodied and emblooded fully and to the extreme, which is why his claim of an alchemical transfusion remains so decisive. During his internment at the mental asylum at Rodez, Artaud wrote that his entire life had been devoted to finding out the fundamental substance of the soul and to isolate it in essential fluids (1988, p 454). Although Artaud succeeded in completing a journey that required the consumption of the body into blood and gas in order to rejoin an 'ancient Red Culture', the blood-red alchemical fluid and its cruel nuance remained trapped within the vessels, tubes and orifices of another matter, whose solid forms could not be grinded down to a

fundamental substance. The transfusionability of theatre remained in doubt, but it is precisely that doubt, so fluid and unstable, which enables us now to continue wondering. In leaving question marks and unfinished thoughts, Artaud sought to prevent the systematisation of alchemical theatre.

Artaud asks himself with a laconic and almost urgent romanticism: 'Who does not see that all these esoterisms are the same, and mean spiritually the same thing? They express a single idea- geometrical, mathematical, organic- an idea which reconciles man with nature and with life' (1988, p 364). He concludes: 'Mexican esoterism is the last to be based on blood'- [...] 'I say we must draw out the hidden magic from an earth which bears no resemblance to the egotistical world that persists in walking on its surface' (364). But insofar as Nature remained concealed behind its rock-solid forms, instead of injecting himself with the fluids of that ideal red earth, Artaud only succeed in drawing blood at his own self-crucifixion.

REFERENCES

- Artaud, Antonin 1995, *Watchfiends & Rack Screams. Works from the Final Period* by Antonin Artaud. Edited and Translated by Clayton Eshleman with Bernard Bador, Exact Exchange, Boston.
- . 1989. *Artaud on Theatre*. Edited by Claude Schumacher, Methuen, London.
- . 1988. *Selected Writings*. Edited by Susan Sontag. Translated by Helen Weaver, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles.
- . 1976. *The Peyote Dance*. Translated by Helen Weaver, Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York.
- . 1958. *The Theatre and its Double*. Translated by Mary Caroline Richards, Grove Weidenfeld, New York.
- Blau, Herbert. 2002. *The Dubious Spectacle. Extremities of Theatre 1976-2000*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- . 1982a. *Take up the Bodies. Theatre at the Vanishing Point*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana.
- . 1982b. *Blooded Thought. Occasions of Theatre*. Performing Arts Journal Publications, New York.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari. 2004. *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Contributor Brian Massumi, Continuum, London.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *Writing and Difference*, Translated by Alan Bass, Routledge, London.
- Diamond, Elin. 2003. 'Modern Drama/ Modernity's Drama'. In Ric Knowles, Joanne Tompkins and W. B. Worthen (eds.), *Modern Drama: Defining the Field*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto
- Esslin, Martin. 1976. *Artaud: The Man and His Work*, John Calder, London.
- Etchells, Tim. 1999. *Certain Fragments. Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment*, Routledge, London.
- Jarry, Alfred. 2001. *Adventures in Pataphysics. Collected Works I*. Translated by Paul Edwards and Antony Melville, Atlas Press, London.
- Le Clézio, Jean-Marie Gustave. 1993. *The Mexican Dream, Or, The Interrupted Thought of Amerindian Civilizations*. Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Lumholtz, Carl. 1902. *Unknown Mexico Volume I*, Macmillan and Co, London.
- O'Bryan, C. Jill. 2005. *Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing*, University of Minnesota Press, London & Minneapolis.
- Stone Peters, Julie. 2002. 'Artaud in the Sierra Madre: Theatrical Bodies, Primitive Signs, Ritual Landscapes.' In Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri (eds.), *Land/scape/theatre*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.