

Antonin Artaud : works on paper : October 3, 1996-January 7, 1997

[Christina Houston]

Author

Artaud, Antonin, 1896-1948

Date

1996

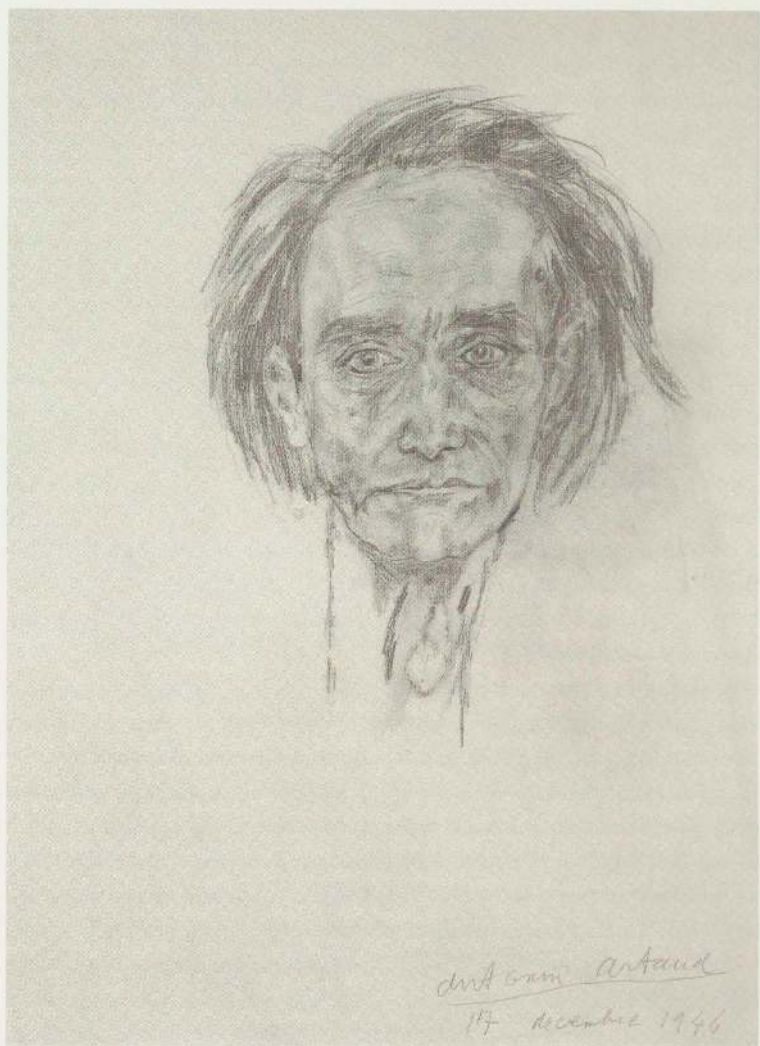
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Antonin Artaud

WORKS ON PAPER

October 3, 1996–January 7, 1997

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

"My drawings are not drawings but documents.

You must look at them and understand what's inside."

—Antonin Artaud, "Mes dessins ne sont pas des dessins...", Rodez, April, 1946

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Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), a brilliant, tormented figure in Paris avant-garde literary, cinematic, and theatrical circles in the 1920s, is best known for the expression of revolt in his writings, primarily his manifestoes of the Theater of Cruelty. Yet Artaud was also an artist. This first American exhibition of his drawings includes three distinct groups of works: the "Spells," the "Rodez Drawings," and a series of portraits and self-portraits, all executed between 1937 and 1948. Few images of the human psyche are as direct and intensely drawn as these works by Artaud, rarely exhibited until quite recently.

Artaud's life took the form of journeys and voids, marked by periods of frenetic creativity as well as psychological instability. Raised in a strict Catholic family in Marseille, France, Artaud was afflicted as a child with acute meningitis, which left him with a stutter and various nervous disorders. Between 1914 and 1919, he underwent a series of "rest-cures" in hospitals in Switzerland and France, where he began to write poetry and read the work of Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Edgar Allen Poe. Diagnosed with hereditary syphilis, Artaud was prescribed laudanum, an opiate, initiating a lifelong addiction to drugs.

Artaud moved to Paris in 1920, determined to become a writer and actor. After performing minor theatrical roles in the Paris theaters of Lugné-Poë and Charles Dullin, he achieved a brief period of celebrity as a film actor, appearing most memorably as Marat in Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) and as the monk Massieu in Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928).

In addition to acting, Artaud wrote prolifically, publishing his first book of poetry, *Tric-Trac du Ciel* (*Backgammon of Heaven*), in 1923. During this period, he also published art criticism, film scripts, and prose-poems and formulated his early theoretical texts about the theater. At the same time, he became involved with the Surrealists through his friend, the artist André Masson. Appointed the director of the Central Bureau for Surrealist Research in 1925, Artaud edited and published the third issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (15 April 1925). His involvement with Surrealism influenced his script for the film *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), directed by Germaine Dulac, which is widely regarded today as one of the great examples of Surrealist cinema. Artaud's differences with André Breton, the leader of the movement, resulted in his expulsion from the group in 1926.

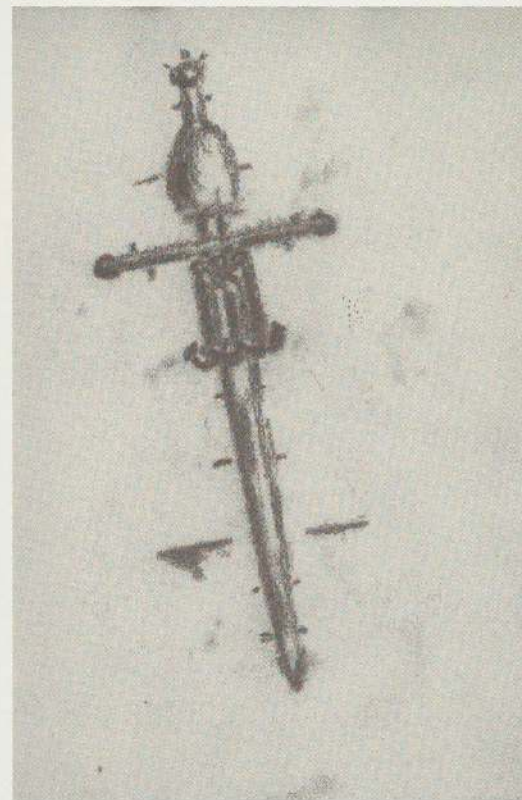
During the early and mid-1930s, Artaud devoted himself to the development and dissemination of his manifestoes about the theater. After founding the Alfred

Jarry Theater in 1929, Artaud published his two seminal manifestoes on the Theater of Cruelty, in 1932 and 1933, and in 1935 mounted *The Cenci*, an ambitious production based on his theories.

Artaud traveled to Mexico via Cuba in 1936, inspired by readings about pre-Cortez civilization and astrology. In Havana, he witnessed a voodoo ceremony and was given a silver dagger by a sorcerer-priest; the dagger later appears in a charcoal drawing of 1944 (fig. 1). In Mexico City, Artaud wrote, lectured, and became acquainted with the artists Diego Rivera and Maria Izquierdo. Hoping to find what he termed the "magic reality of a culture that could be

ignited without much difficulty," he journeyed on horseback to the Sierra Madre in northern Mexico, where he stayed among the Tarahumara Indians and took part in their peyote rituals. He was spellbound by the landscape, and recorded the experience in *A Voyage to the Land of the Tarahumara*.

In November 1936, Artaud returned to Paris, penniless and ill. After several attempts at detoxification and a brief engagement to Cécile Schramme, a Belgian artist, he departed abruptly for Ireland in 1937. There, he traveled to Galway, Dublin, and the remote Aran Islands. Unable to communicate in English and with no money or access to drugs, Artaud became increasingly un-



(Fig. 1): Untitled. c. February 1944. Charcoal, 10 1/4 x 6 5/8" (26.5 x 17.5 cm). Musée National d'Art Moderne—Centre de Création Industrielle/Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Bequest of Paule Thévenin, 1993

stable and was deported from Ireland as an "undesirable." Upon his return to France, he was detained at Le Havre, beginning an eight-year confinement in a succession of psychiatric hospitals.

First from Ireland in 1937 and then from the hospital of Ville-Evrard in Paris, Artaud issued a series of "spells"—violently colored, charred scraps of paper bearing incantations, warnings, and cabalistic signs intended to have a physical effect on



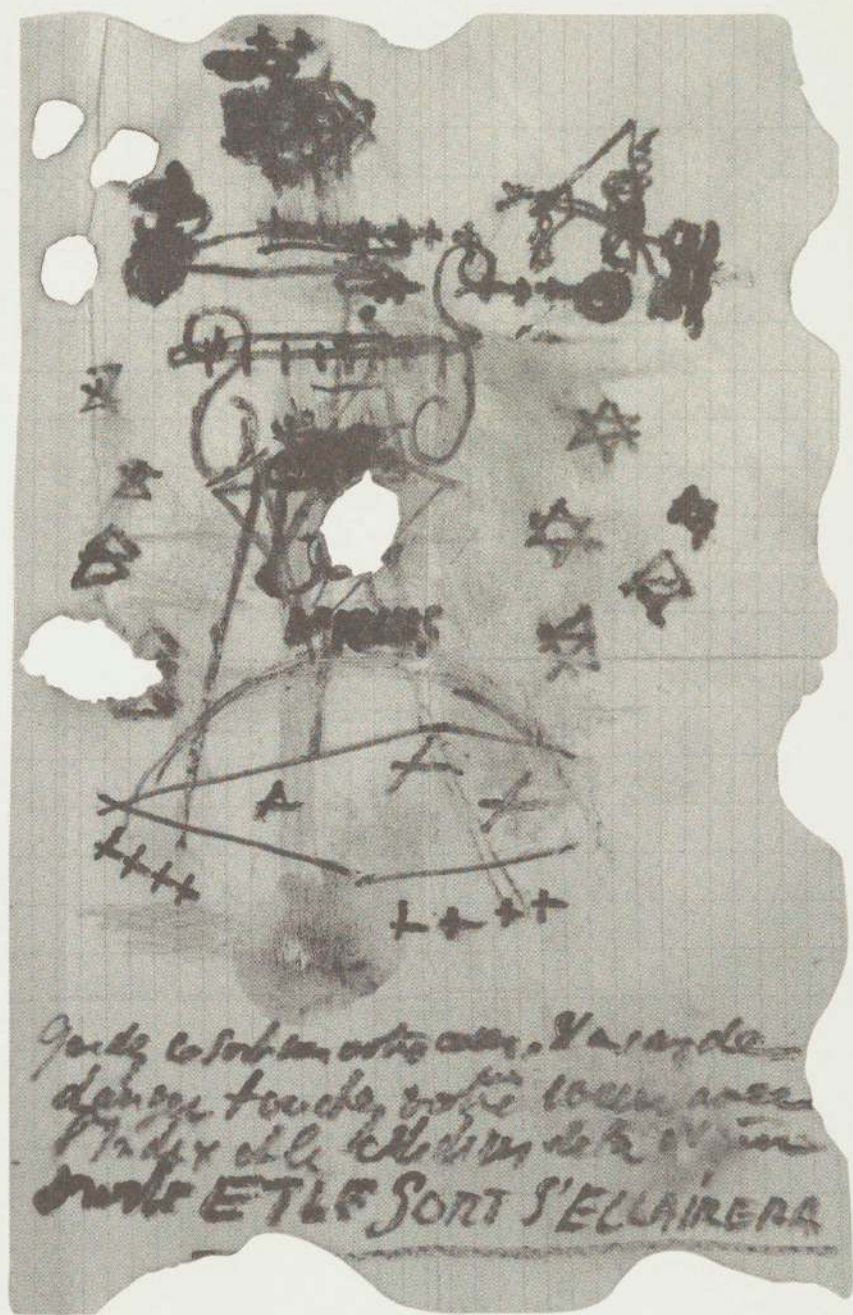
(Fig. 3): *The Soldier with a Gun* (*Le Soldat au fusil*), c. October 1945–January 1946. Graphite and wax crayon, 24 7/8 x 18 3/4" (63 x 48 cm). Musée National d'Art Moderne—Centre de Création Industrielle/Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

their recipients. His spell for Léon Fouks (8 May 1939) (fig. 2), inscribed with thick purple crayon, is attacked—rubbed, burned, incised—as an act of exorcism and purification. The scrawled text, embellished with crosses and hexagrams, instructs the recipient to “keep this spell against your heart. And in case of danger touch your heart with the Index and Middle fingers of your right hand and *the spell will illuminate.*”

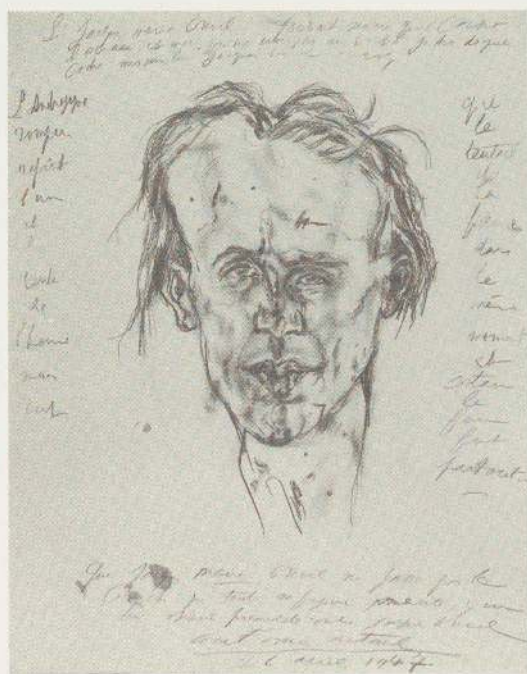
The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 resulted in severe shortages of food and medicine; psychiatric hospitals in particular were hit by penury, and Artaud suffered from these deprivations. In the hospital of Rodez, where he was confined between 1943 and 1946, he was subjected to early experiments with electroshock therapy. Within a period of nineteen months, he received fifty-one electroshock treatments, which caused a broken vertebra and the loss of several teeth. During this period, Artaud began to draw, using graphite, wax crayons, and large sheets of paper given to him by local painter Frédéric Delanglade. The “Rodez Drawings” attest to his acute pain and psychological fragmentation. These drawings are visual metaphors, inflected by a vocabulary of symbols, images, words, and non-words. *The Soldier with a Gun* (October 1945–January 1946) (fig. 3) is strewn with scythes, guns, and disassembled bodies. The phrase “the coward’s season will pass under the canon’s fire” is scrawled across the surface of the work, the words embedded within the composition. The proliferation of weapons in this drawing and others of the period reveal Artaud’s obsession with resistance and his revolt against the internal and external forces torturing him.

After the end of the war in 1945, the artist Jean Dubuffet and the writer Arthur Adamov, who had known Artaud in Paris in the twenties, visited him at Rodez. They arranged his transfer to a private clinic in Ivry, a suburb of Paris. At Ivry, Artaud was free to come and go at will. He experienced a personal and spiritual resurrection: He wrote extensively, appeared in performances of his prose-poems, and produced a series of graphically charged portraits and self-portraits. The subjects for these were a group of admirers and friends who were, in some respect, like a family to Artaud. Among them were Adamov, the actor Roger Blin, Paule Thévenin, her daughter Domnine, her husband Yves, her sister Minouche Pastier, Lily Dubuffet (the artist’s wife), the art dealer Pierre Loeb, his daughter Florence Loeb, the young poet Jacques Prevel, his wife Rolande, and his mistress Jany de Ruy. Prevel described Artaud’s working process: He stood before a table covered by a sheet of paper, chanting, humming, and shrieking while gouging his pencils and crayons into the paper. He excavated the features of his subjects’ faces, and, as seen in *The Portrait of Jacques Prevel* (26 April 1947) (fig. 4), he tore apart and reassembled the skin, wounding it, puncturing it, re-ordering the anatomy of the face and head and surrounding the entire image with text. In Artaud’s *Self-Portrait* (17 December 1946) (cover), he confronts the viewer with a relentless frontal gaze, the lines of his face incised, his hair spreading mantle-like around his face, starkly outlined against an open expanse of blank paper.

Artaud’s portraits and self-portraits were exhibited at the Galerie Pierre in July 1947, the only exhibition of his work during his lifetime. For the catalogue of the exhibition, Artaud wrote a prose-poem in which he noted, “the human face, / in fact, wears / a perpetual death of sorts / on its face / which it is incumbent on the painter precisely / to save it from / by restoring / its own features.”



(Fig. 2): *Spell for Léon Fouks*. 8 May 1939. Wax crayon on burned paper, 8 1/4 x 5 1/4" (21 x 13.5 cm). Private collection



(Fig. 4): Portrait of Jacques Prevel, 26 April 1947. Graphite, 25 x 19 1/2" (63.5 x 48.5 cm). Musée National d'Art Moderne—Centre de Création Industrielle/Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

nonetheless enjoyed an underground reputation. Their impact in the milieu of visual art is apparent in the work of artists as diverse as Jean Dubuffet, Alphonso Ossorio, Georg Baselitz, Arnulf Rainer, Nancy Spero, Patti Smith, and Kiki Smith.

Artaud has emerged as one of the most compelling figures of this century. The singular vision that informs his drawings and the authority of his voice have not abated, even half a century after his death.

Christina Houstian
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Drawings

This exhibition was realized with the support of the collections of the Musée National d'Art Moderne—Centre de Création Industrielle/Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Cover: *Self-Portrait*, 1946. Graphite, 24 3/4 x 18 1/8" (62 x 46 cm). Collection Florence Loeb

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Calendar of Events around *Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper*

AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1

11 West 53 Street, New York

Tickets: \$10; members \$9; students

and seniors \$8. For information, call

212-708-9798.

October 10, 6:00 p.m.: Lecture by Jacques

Derrida about Artaud's drawings

AT THE DRAWING CENTER

35 Wooster Street, New York

For information, call 212-219-2166.

October 11, 7:00 p.m.: *Artaud: Writing/*

Drawing. Panel discussion with Jacques

Derrida, Clayton Eshleman, Margit Rowell,

Nancy Spero, and Gayatri Spivak

October 15, 7:00 p.m.: *Artaud by Artaud*.

Readings by Clayton Eshleman, Vincent

Kaufmann, and Susan Sontag.

November 12, 7:00 p.m.: *Soul Scrapings*.

Readings by Jimmie Durham, Denis Hollier,

Chris Kraus and Lynne Tillman

November 16, 7:00 p.m.: *Baudrillard on*

Artaud. Conversation between Jean

Baudrillard and Sylvère Lotringer,

introduced by Margit Rowell

November 20, 7:00 p.m.: *Artaud: Psychosis*

and Revolt. Lecture by Julia Kristeva

November 22, 7:00 p.m.: *Solo Performances*.

Featuring Penny Arcade, Jeffrey Jullich,

John Kelly, Deb Margolin, and D.J. Spooky

The Artaud events at The Drawing Center

have been generously sponsored by agnès b,

The William D. Rollnick and Nancy Ellison

Rollnick Foundation, and by The Cultural

Services of the French Embassy.

AT LA MAISON FRANÇAISE AT

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

16 Washington Mews, New York

For information, call 212-998-8750.

October 18, 2:30-5:00 p.m.: *Delirious*

Anthropology, a symposium and discussion

of Antonin Artaud's texts. Readings and

lectures by Peggy Phelan (Tisch School

of Art, NYU); Una Chaudhuri (Tisch School

of Art, NYU); Sylvère Lotringer (Columbia

University); John Szwed (Yale University)

and Michael Taussig (Columbia University)

October 18, 8:00 p.m.: *Voyage to Rodez*, 1986

(Chris Kraus) and *La véritable histoire*

d'Artaud le Môme, 1994 (Gérard Mordillat

and Jérôme Prieur)

AT ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

32 Second Avenue (at 2 Street), New York

Tickets: \$7.00; students \$5.00. For

information, call 212-505-5181.

Antonin Artaud in/and Cinema

A series organized by Sophie Fenwick and Julius

Ziz and presented in collaboration with the Film

Department of the Musée d'Art Moderne—

Centre de Création Industrielle, Centre Georges

Pompidou, Paris, as well as Gaumont,

Cinémathèque Française and the Archives du

Film—Centre National de la Cinématographie,

Bois D'Arcy. All films are silent or in French.

October 24, 8:00 p.m.: *La Passion de Jeanne*

d'Arc, 1927 (Carl Dreyer)

October 25, 8:00 and 10:00 p.m.: *Liliom*,

1934 (Fritz Lang)

October 26, 2:00 and 7:00 p.m.: *Napoléon*,

1926 (Abel Gance)

October 27, 5:00 and 8:30 p.m.: *La Coquille*

et le Clergyman, 1927 (Germaine Dulac);

Methusalem, 1927 (Jean Painlevé);

Cinémaportrait du Docteur Ferdière, 1994

(Jean-Claude Fosse); and *La véritable*

histoire d'Artaud le Môme, 1994 (Gérard

Mordillat and Jérôme Prieur)

November 1, 8:00 p.m.: *Fait-Divers*, 1924

(Autant-Lara)

November 2, 7:00 p.m.: *Les Croix de Bois*,

1931 (Raymond Bernard)

November 3, 5:00 p.m.: *Tarakanova*, 1929

(Raymond Bernard); 8:00 p.m.: *L'Argent*,

1928 (Marcel L'Herbier)

AT THE FRENCH INSTITUTE/

ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE

22 East 60 Street, New York

For information, call 212-355-6100.

November 21, 7:00 p.m.: *L'Héritage d'Antonin*

Artaud. A lecture by Bernard Noël