

AVANT-GARDE HERITAGE: THREE CONCEPTS OF RITUALISM FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

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Abstract

What exactly do we mean when, in the contemporary performing arts, the word ritual is pronounced? I argue that, although one main concept of theatrical ritualism is currently activated, the history of twentieth-century theatre offers at least two alternative notions that were less successful at establishing themselves. The dominant notion may be termed 'hot' ritual, and is chiefly inspired by the writings of Antonin Artaud. The first alternative notion will be termed 'minimalist' ritual (strongly related to the Fluxus movement and happening art), the second 'liturgical.' Conspicuously, the theatrical-liturgical efforts of the interbellum period transmitted no legacy to post-war European theatre.

In his essay from 1974, 'From Ritual to Theatre and Back,' Richard Schechner attempted to explain what crucial aspects of ritual had made it so attractive to the avant-garde artists of the twentieth century. Schechner identified 'efficacy' as the defining characteristic of ritual, in contrast to theatre—either the sacred efficacy of religious ritual, remediating the community's relationship to the divine, or the social efficacy of rituals such as wedding ceremonies or rites of passage, that change the social status of some of its participants.

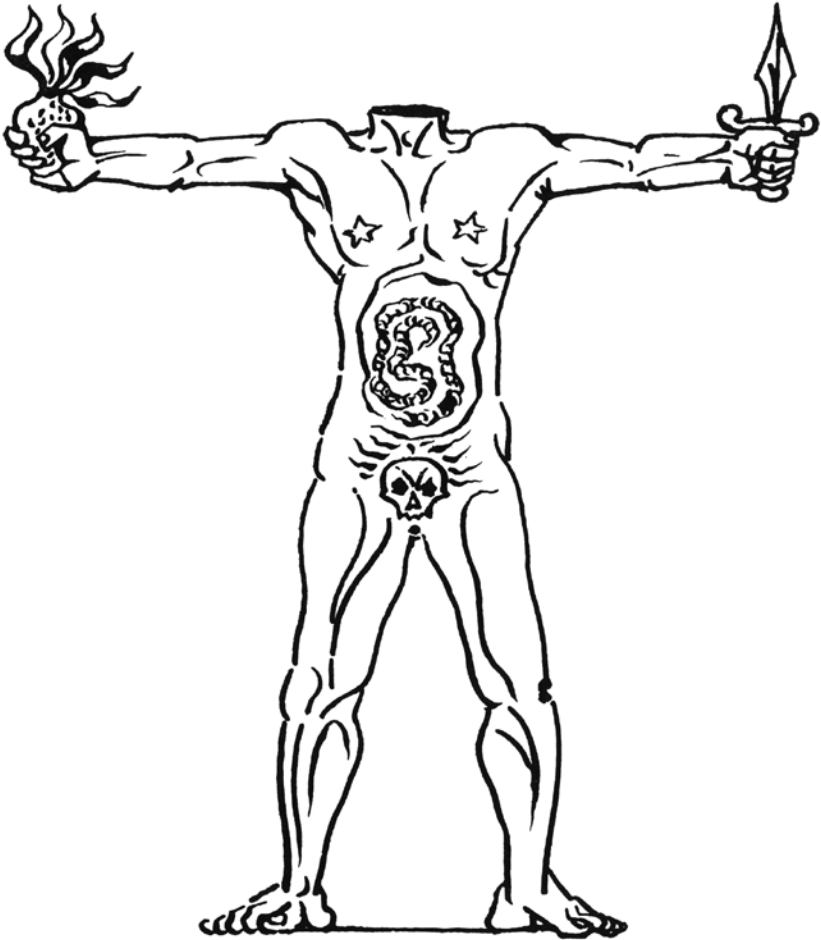
But after generations of avant-garde artists have attempted to rediscover this fabled 'efficacy' in the most various ways, the question may be posed whether ritualism is still a credible alternative for the continued reinvention of Western theatre. High-profile productions such as Jan Fabre's *Je suis sang* at the Festival d'Avignon (2001), or the *122nd Action* by Hermann Nitsch at the famous Burgtheater in Vienna (2005), throw doubt on the conception of ritualistic theatre as a critical instrument to expose the hidden or repressed truths of Western society. Ritualism—the artistic *mise-en-scène* of rituals—rather seems to have become an integral part of the society of spectacle. In the caustic phrasing of Roland Barthes: 'L'avant-garde n'est jamais qu'une façon de chanter la mort bourgeoise, car sa propre mort appartient encore à la bourgeoisie ...'¹

With Fabre and Nitsch, the bourgeois swan song has turned into the death rattle of armoured knights and sacrificial virgins. The critical attitude, already institutionalized, now lapses into ritualistic kitsch. But kitsch cannot appear as such without being related to a widespread cliché. These two directors merely make manifest that ‘ritualism’ itself is a problematic category. What exactly do we conceive when, in the contemporary performing arts, the word ritual is pronounced?

I will argue that there is one main concept of theatrical ritualism currently activated, and that there are at least two viable alternative notions to be found in the history of twentieth-century theatre and theatrical theory. The dominant notion may be termed ‘hot’ ritual (on the analogy of classical sociological theories on the role of effervescent ceremonies in the genesis of morality—e.g., in the work of Emile Durkheim²). The first alternative notion will be termed ‘minimalist’ ritual, the second ‘liturgical.’

The hot concept of ritual is based on certain ideas of the *historical* avant-garde, as they were interpreted and put into practice by the *post-war* (or ‘neo-’) avant-garde. This historical detour subsequently weighted the original, pre-war theories. ‘Hot ritual’ was inspired (at least partially) by the writings of Antonin Artaud, but, from the 1960s on, he was invariably read through the lens of a certain body of post-war performances. This thread of ritualism includes so-called ‘physical theatre’ by groups such as the Living Theatre, The Performance Group, Grotowski’s Laboratory Theatre, and the numerous international disciples of the Polish director’s workshops. It was reinforced by the simultaneous emergence of body art and performance art, practiced by Yves Klein, Yoko Ono, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann, and many others.

However, other trends in music and visual arts led to a second and different understanding of ritual. This ritualistic current, which I dub ‘minimalist,’ originated in the sphere of Fluxus. Artists such as (in the US) John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Allan Kaprow, George Maciunas, and (in Europe) Joseph Beuys, Ben Vautier, and Marcel Broodthaers moved towards a conception of ritualistic events far less related to eruptive, pseudo-Dionysiac gatherings. Rather, these ‘untitled events’ and happenings were based on chance phenomena, *objets trouvés*, improvised materials, humor, and—certainly in Kaprow’s case—a certain ‘quiet’ quality often described as related to meditation and Buddhist ceremony. I wish to examine this particular quality further by means of the theoretical works of the French sociologist and philosopher Georges Bataille. Admittedly, Bataille seems at first sight more connected to the ‘hot’ concept of ritual, although I will argue that he ultimately came closest to the minimalist notion.



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First issue of *Acéphale* (June 1936), the literary and philosophical journal founded by Georges Bataille

A third conception of ritual was even less prominent, and did not manage to last until the present day. This conception was introduced by modernist productions from the interwar period based on Catholic liturgy. Throughout my exploration of the alternative concepts of ritualism, the guiding question will be: why does 'ritual' in the performing arts today look the way we expect it to look?

Antonin Artaud's Theory of Catharsis

As a starting point for describing the presence of ritualism in the writings of Antonin Artaud, one cannot overlook his most explicit socio-theatrical concept, namely, that of collective purification. It is a topos in Artaud studies that the theory of the Theatre of Cruelty also encompasses a cathartic doctrine.³ The necessity to reflect on social healing stems from the diagnosis of the apocalyptic cultural philosopher Artaud that Western culture is being eroded by a 'crisis.' Expressed in the most extreme terms: 'nous sommes tous fous, désespérés et malades.'⁴ In that regard Artaud's opinions are positioned within the framework of popular occultism and a fascination for Eastern philosophy.

In 'Le Théâtre et la Culture,' the essay that introduces *Le Théâtre et son Double* (1938) as an ominous prelude, this crisis is alluded to the least vaguely. A schism between 'life' and 'culture' results in a certain quantum of negative but vital energy, which no longer finds a safety valve via culture, but is expressed in perverse felonies, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and train disasters.⁵ As Goodall remarked, Artaud's cathartic solution for that problem is to be found in keeping with Paracelsic homeopathy, which was provided to him by Dr. René Allendy.⁶ Evil must be conquered by its equal, in this case by a theatrical reinforcement factor: 'le théâtre est fait pour vider collectivement des abcès.'⁷ The intensity of the theatrical happening fuses actor and spectator together into an association which allows the negative energy to course through in a therapeutically effective way.

Artaud attached great importance to mass theatre. He undertook various attempts to organize such a spectacle.⁸ Consequently, the *collective* aspect of Artaudian catharsis must be underlined. The emphasis is predominantly on the theatre as a means of mutual purification, and even socio-political pacification. In some areas Artaud confesses to an extremely naive belief in a violent theatre as a deterrent for the masses: 'je défie bien un spectateur à qui des scènes violentes auront passé leur sang (...) de se livrer au dehors à des idées de guerre, d'émeute et d'assassinat hasardeux.'⁹ Artaud confesses to an idealistic doctrine regarding the



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *Je suis sang (conte de fées médiéval)* (2001).
Performers: Heike Langsdorf, Cedric Charron, Ivana Jozic
(amongst others). Photo by Wonge Bergmann**

operation of the theatre, entirely according to the ‘heilsame Schauer’ that, according to Friedrich Schiller, would make a deep impression on the audience.¹⁰

The predominant image of Artaud’s ideas was greatly influenced by the way they were disseminated after his death in 1948. An ‘Artaud myth’ developed that read his pre-war writings through the lens of the final years.¹¹ Artaud became the archetypal nemesis of social order as such. In his ravaged body was inscribed the demand to liberate the individual from the constraints that the social system had installed. Especially his long psychiatric internment influenced this reading of his life and works, together with the much-publicized events of his return to public life between 1945 and 1948, such as the excruciating ‘performance’ at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, *Histoire Vécue D’ARTAUD-MOMO* (13 January 1947).

The Artaud myth easily fitted in with the neo-avant-garde performing arts developing after the Second World War. Post-war counterculture had many interests in common with Artaud. It explored occultism and believed that dreams, narcot-

ics, and spontaneous and accidental activities should inspire the arts. Artaud's strong criticism of Western society was responsible for the principal attraction of his work for theatre reformers like Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Julian Beck and Judith Malina.¹² This in turn fostered the hypothesis that post-war ritualistic performance was the true realization of Artaud's original theories. Ritualism gradually became understood as the need for therapeutic, collective theatrical events that smashed the existing social order and replaced it with an authentic and intense, if short-lived, experience of *communitas*.¹³ Thus, the Artaudian notion of social crisis and purification, realized (in a certain way) through the post-war emergence of physical and environmental theatre, provided the basis for a 'hot' concept of ritual in the performing arts.

The Minimalist Fluxus Concept of Ritual

When contrasted with the ritualized and primitivist happenings from post-war theatre, most events organized by Fluxus artists seem rather light-headed and frivolous. John Cage himself advocated a kind of theatre that would be indistinguishable from normal life: '[T]he reason I want to make my definition of theater that simple is so one could view everyday life itself as theater.'¹⁴ The essence of the theatrical is to be found in the eye of the beholder, an ideal Fluxus spectator, or 'everyday life artist.'

In this regard, the abundant 'scores' for minimalist happenings that Allan Kaprow produced, may be considered to constitute a second, if minor, paradigm for ritualism. Consider, for example, the score of *Taking a shoe for a walk* (undated):

Pulling a shoe on a string through the city
 examining the shoe from time to time, to see if it's worn out
 wrapping your own shoe, after each examination, with layers of bandage or tape,
 in the amount you think the shoe on a string is worn out
 repeating, adding to your shoe more layers of bandage or tape, until, at the end of
 the day, the shoe you are pulling appears completely worn out¹⁵

Taking a shoe for a walk might be labelled subversive, because its performer will, in an ordinary town or city, probably be frowned upon by passers-by. He might even be considered a tramp and treated accordingly. Yet its main theme is not a critique or commentary on public life. It is precisely everyday life itself, or rather, the isolated and slightly queer, but ultimately rather harmless and insignificant action itself. To act out *Taking a shoe for a walk* means literally nothing more

but to execute the described steps, regardless of the context of the performance, nor of the attitude the performer takes towards it—either in a concentrated and contemplative way, or merely bored and tired, or compelled to do it by someone else. The score stipulates the details of an action that is purely self-referential. It might very well invite the actor to reconsider his life and discover a fundamental wisdom in the process. But it might just as well not.

No theoretical ancestor or ‘mastermind’ is equally strongly connected to the Fluxus events, as Artaud was to the pseudo-Dionysiac spectacles. Certainly Dada would qualify, albeit primarily on a practical level. Dadaists (and also, to a certain degree, Situationists) strove to transform the chance happenings and idiosyncrasies of everyday life into art. But they did not provide an elaborate theoretical framework for those attempts. However, there is a surprising degree of correspondence between Fluxus events and the writings of Georges Bataille.

In Bataille’s articles of the late 1930s for the *Acéphale* journal, and in the events he organized with the eponymous ‘secret society,’ a concept of ritual appears that fits Fluxus surprisingly well. At first sight, however, Bataille’s starting point is similar (almost verbatim) to that of Artaud. The *Acéphale* project, Bataille notes in the first issue, ‘ne peut pas être limité à l’expression d’une pensée et encore moins à ce qui est justement considéré comme art.’¹⁶ It is rather to be compared to a kind of political agitation, animated by the same force of nature that drives us to producing and consuming food. In the same vein, Artaud commences his reflections on culture with the derogatory remark that: ‘Avant d’en revenir à la culture je considère que le monde a faim, et qu’il ne se soucie pas de la culture.’¹⁷ It follows (at least in Artaud’s mind) that, once human hunger is stilled, it ought to be the residue of hunger that drives humans towards culture, not some lofty and self-sufficient ideal.

Equally similar is their apocalyptic diagnosis of the total crisis engulfing Western society. It is only concerning the proposed remedies that Bataille starts to differ from Artaud’s opinions, although this is only manifest from the *Acéphale* texts onwards. Earlier in the 1930s, the anti-fascist group Contre-Attaque—in which not only Bataille, but also André Breton and many diverse intellectuals from the left were involved—had called for a revolutionary uprising. The masses would conquer the streets, driven by ‘l’émotion soulevée directement par des événements frappants.’¹⁸ This sounds highly similar to Artaud’s description of the public agitation accompanying a police raid on a brothel, which he described as ‘the ideal theatre.’¹⁹

In 1937, however, Contre-Attaque had stranded, and Bataille's search for an event that would embody the sacral in modern society turned inwards. In his theoretical essays from the early 1930s, the sociologist Bataille had studied the phenomenon of 'dépense pure' (pure expenditure).²⁰ The concept he derived from non-Western social ceremonies, such as the *potlatch* of certain Native American tribes (reciprocal gift-giving in which wealth is redistributed or sometimes destroyed, bestowing a higher social status on the giver). Such festivals were a prime example of a wider category of social phenomena he dubbed 'the heterogeneous.' It also included eroticism, waste, religious sacrifice, art works, and generally speaking all sorts of expenditure that did not contribute to rational and economically productive goals.

It was phenomena of unproductive expenditure, Bataille believed, that made human community truly possible. Their disappearance in over-rationalized Western societies had also hastened the disintegration of the social fabric. Parallel to the *Acéphale* journal, a 'secret society' also called Acéphale was founded to rekindle events of pure expenditure. It remains unclear what events Bataille precisely scheduled for the members of the group. Even taking into account the documents disclosed by Marina Galletti,²¹ the following description by Botting and Wilson can hardly be augmented:

Particularly interested in sacrifice, the group met in secret and in locations like the Place de la Concorde, where Louis XVI was executed. They also met in ominous places deep in the woods where plans were made for a human sacrifice, an act of criminal violence that would bind the group together in shared guilt.²²

In any case, Bataille conceived the happenings as pure 'play,' according to the definition that Johan Huizinga would give around the same time in his book *Homo Ludens* (published in Dutch in 1938). 'If we consider it in the perspective of a world determined by forces and their effects, it is a *superabundans* in the full meaning of the word, something that is superfluous.'²³ Especially (religious) sacrifice appealed to Bataille, as the perfect example of a sacred act that was wholly isolated from the world of reason and economic production, i.e., an act of total freedom. 'Si elle n'est pas libre, l'existence devient vide ou neutre et, si elle est libre, elle est un jeu.'²⁴ In this regard Bataille's vision is quite different from that of Artaud. His theory of ritualist theatre was clearly aimed toward collective purification. That of Bataille, on the contrary, aspired to wholly self-contained acts of pure expenditure. His scripts for the Acéphale happenings strictly stipulated what was to happen, but it never turned into a spectacle, nor was there an audience.



**Troubleyn/Jan Fabre, *Je suis sang (conte de fées médiéval)* (2001).
Performers: Ivana Jozic, Katrien Bruyneel, Anny Czupper.
Photo by Wonge Bergmann**

Catholic Liturgy and Modernist Theatre

During his activities with the Surrealist movement in the 1920s, Artaud co-edited an issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* entitled 'Fin de l'ère chrétienne.' Bataille's *Acéphale* was to be a religious community, and even 'savagely religious,' but only 'in a violently anti-Christian sense.'²⁵ Both models for contemporary ritualism that I have discussed were based on anti-Christian ideas. But the interwar period also saw diverse theatrical reformers advocate the need for a *return* to Christianity. T.S. Eliot stated, in 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry' (1928), that: 'The only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is in a High Mass well performed' (Eliot 1972: 47). In the same vein, the French dramatist Paul Claudel's artistic conclusion was to introduce liturgical elements in the texture of his plays. In *Le Masque et l'encensoir* (1921), Gaston Baty developed a similar intuition into a historical essay on the origins of theatre. Religious ceremony, and most importantly, medieval Catholic liturgy, was the true dramatic phenomenon, because it had integrated all dramatic components—the spoken text and the non-verbal elements of spectacle—into a harmonious whole.²⁶

Catholic liturgy, however, also posed a tremendous problem to modernist theatre practitioners. Convinced that theatre should break out of the autonomy of art, and approach the efficacy of ritual, it was unclear how this efficacy was to be understood or realized. However great their admiration, few modernists went so far as to strive for a genre truly in-between religious practice and modern drama. They tried to imbue the existing Western theatre with the powers of liturgy, but were reluctant to demand the creation of a new dramatic genre that would truly reinvent liturgy for the modern age. Others, however, unhesitatingly stated that such a form could be developed. Its creators should be the ideologically organized masses of the interwar period.

Mass theatre was a popular expression of 'community art' in most European countries during the interbellum period. From Max Reinhardt's lavish open-air spectacles (such as *Everyman* in Salzburg, 1920) to the Soviet restagings of the Storming of the Winter Palace in Leningrad, or the Socialist workers' *Laienspiel* (lay theatre), theatre visionaries focused on ever larger groups for entertainment as well as political agitation. Among Western European countries, Belgium was one of the last to follow the new trend of socio-theatrical events. It was imported via the Socialist movement from Germany and Russia, passing through the Netherlands where workers' choirs (both singing and reciting choirs) had quickly risen in favour. In the case of Belgium, and Flanders in particular, it is especially interesting to note that the mass theatre phenomenon displayed an ideological heteroge-

neity not seen elsewhere. Catholicism soon appropriated the Socialist idea of lay theatre and choral training. Reciting choirs and movement choirs, composed of amateurs, were trained by theatre and dance professionals to participate in mass events that celebrated key moments of the Catholic renouveau of the 1930s. Key events include the mass play of the Catholic youth movement KAJ (Katholieke Arbeiders Jeugd), directed by Lode Geysen (Brussels, Heysel Stadium, 1935), the Rerum Novarum play *Bevrijding* (*Liberation*, Antwerp, 1936), and Jozef Boon's *uis Christi: The Play of the Holy Blood* (Bruges, 1938).

In his book *Spreekkoor en Massatooneel* (1937), Jozef Boon reported on an interesting and untitled choral drama he directed in the town of Diest with a group of 100 students, on the occasion of the feast of Saint Jan Berchmans, the students' patron saint. The action took place on the local marketplace, and Boon had intentionally placed his chorus on a raised podium, so that it could 'dominate the market,' i.e., the audience of 2000 students that would respond to the reciting choir.²⁷ The happening was adequately framed against the imposing backdrop of Diest's Gothic church. The relics of Saint Jan Berchmans were displayed in front of the church portal, and the carillon played music composed by Arthur Meulemans, a frequent collaborator of Boon's mass plays. Particularly striking about the Diest mass spectacle is that Boon strove to integrate his choral drama with the official church festivities devoted to Saint Jan Berchmans. The bishop and the clerics who participated were explicitly designated as 'being part of the choral drama.'²⁸ Indeed, the event ended with a huge open-air celebration of Mass. If one is to believe Boon himself, the event truly 'conquered' its attendance.

Conclusion

During and after the Second World War, the popularity of mass theatre quickly declined. The urgent task of rebuilding war-torn Europe apparently left little space for mass agitation and grand ideological displays. However, it remains a striking fact that the theatrical-liturgical efforts of the interbellum period transmitted no legacy to post-war European theatre. When confronted with wholly new types of ritualistic events—physical and environmental theatre, Dionysiac performance events, and Fluxus happenings—Catholic liturgy had completely disappeared from the general frame of reference. Instead, post-war performance studies avidly picked up such anti-Christian theories from the pre-war avant-garde as Surrealism, Dadaism, and especially the writings of Artaud and Bataille. It is worth reminding that, at certain junctions of history, other concepts of ritual have been possible.

Notes

- 1 BARTHES, Roland, 'À l'avant-garde de quel théâtre?', in: *Théâtre populaire*, May 1956; republished in: *Écrits sur le théâtre*, ed. J.-L. Rivière, Seuil, Paris, 2002, p. 203.
- 2 ADLOFF, Frank, 'Beyond Interests and Norms: Toward a Theory of Gift-Giving and Reciprocity in Modern Societies', in: *Constellations*, 13, 3 (2006), p. 410.
- 3 See, e.g., VIRMAUX, Alain and Odette, *Artaud: Un Bilan critique*, Belfond, Paris, 1979, pp. 295-6; GOODALL, Jane, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, p. 107; INNES, Christopher, *Avant-Garde Theatre 1892-1992*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 59-60.
- 4 ARTAUD, Antonin, *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976-, vol. 4, p. 75; compare pp. 9-11, 40, 72, 85, 112.
- 5 ARTAUD, *idem*, vol. 4, pp. 10-11, 216; vol. 5, p. 166.
- 6 GOODALL, pp. 106-107.
- 7 ARTAUD, *idem*, vol. 4, p. 30; compare p. 58 and vol. 5, pp. 153ff.
- 8 ARTAUD, *idem*, vol. 2, p. 162; vol. 3, pp. 167-168, 215-217; vol. 4, pp. 72, 83, 324; vol. 5, pp. 152-154; compare KRZYWKOWSKI, Isabelle, 'Le côté révélateur de la matière: Masques, mannequins et machines dans le théâtre d'Antonin Artaud (1920-1935)' in PENOT-LACASSAGNE, Olivier, ed., *Artaud et les avant-gardes théâtrales*, Lettres Modernes Minard, Paris, 2005, pp. 31-32.
- 9 ARTAUD, *idem*, vol. 4, p. 80; compare vol. 2: 162.
- 10 SCHILLER, Friedrich, 'Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet' (1784) in *Werke*, Deutsche Buch-Gemeinschaft, Berlin, 1956, vol. 2, p. 436.
- 11 BONACINA, Riccardo, *Artaud, il pubblico e la critica*, Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1984.
- 12 ORIE, Monique, 'Le Théâtre des années soixante: "L'ère Artaud"', in: PENOT-LACASSAGNE, Olivier, ed., *idem*, pp. 120-129.
- 13 TURNER, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-structure*, Aldine, Chicago, 1969.
- 14 Cage quoted in AUSLANDER, Philip, 'Fluxus Art-Amusement: The Music of the Future?', in: HARDING, James, ed., *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2000, pp. 114.
- 15 A selection of unpublished scores by Kaprow, amongst which *Taking a shoe for a walk*, could be consulted at the exposition *Allan Kaprow—Life as Art* (Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, 2007).
- 16 *Acéphale* 1 (24 June 1936), unpaginated, reprinted in CAMUS, Michel, ed., *Acéphale: Religion, sociologie, philosophie, 1936-1939*, Jean Michel Place, Paris, 1980.
- 17 ARTAUD, *idem*, vol. 4, p. 9. The chapter from *Le Théâtre et son Double* containing this quote was originally published shortly before the first issue of *Acéphale* appeared, namely, in *La Bête noire*, 5 (1 Oct. 1935).
- 18 BATAILLE, Georges, *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1970-1988, vol. 1, p. 403.
- 19 ARTAUD, *idem*, vol. 2, p. 16.
- 20 Namely 'La notion de dépense' and 'La structure psychologique du fascisme', in: BATAILLE, *idem*, vol. 1, pp. 302-320 and 339-371.
- 21 BATAILLE, Georges, *L'Apprenti Sorcier: Textes, lettres et documents (1932-1939)*,

- ed. Marina Galletti, La Différence, Paris, 1999.
- ²² BOTTING, Fred, and WILSON, Scott, *Bataille*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2001, p. 103.
- ²³ Huizinga quoted and translated in VOEGELIN, Eric, 'Review of *Homo Ludens: Versuch einer Bestimmung des Spielements der Kultur* by Jan Huizinga', *The Journal of Politics*, 10, 1 (Feb. 1948), p. 181.
- ²⁴ *Acéphale* 1 (24 June 1936), unpaginated, reprinted in CAMUS, *idem*.
- ²⁵ SURYA, Michel, *Georges Bataille: la mort à l'oeuvre*, Gallimard, Paris, 1987, p. 241.
- ²⁶ CROMBEZ, Thomas, 'Liturgy and Mass Spectacle: The case of Catholic mass theatre in Flanders during the interwar period', *Performance Research*, 13, 3 (2008), pp. 55-63.
- ²⁷ BOON, Jozef, *Spreekkoor en Massatooneel*, Van Haver, Sint-Niklaas, 1937, p. 79.
- ²⁸ BOON, *idem*, p. 79.