

L'Écriture Feminine in the Theater of Cruelty

“One reason for the asphyxiating atmosphere in which we live without possible escape or recourse. . . is this respect for what has already been written. . . as if all expression were not finally exhausted and had not reached the point where things must fall apart if they are to begin again.” (252)

--Antonin Artaud, “No More Masterpieces”

The literary musings and concepts of poet, actor, theatre theorist, modernist icon of fragment and dissolution, Antonin Artaud influenced French feminist writer Hélène Cixous. She writes lyrical and densely poetic theorizations on writing woman's body and experience into text. Stylistic semblances between these writers, living in distinctly different eras (Artaud in early 20th century, Cixous born in 1937), appear as vastly metaphorical, passionate, haughty, and paradigmatic consciousness-shifting texts.¹ Cixous invokes in manifesto spirit an active engagement with what she terms *l'écriture feminine* in her 1976 essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa.” She exhorts that “[w]omen must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing...” (875). The subject for Cixous' “female-sexed texts” is a universal “she,” or women, their bodies, experiences left undocumented in “the language of men and their grammar” (887). In a similar vein of revolt, Artaud urges in his 1938 essay, “No More Masterpieces,” for an end to obligatory, compulsory respect and repetitive production of canonized art forms; he attacks the “paralysis of language” (Barber 86) that happens once a work achieves literary value and status. Artaud suggests truth is apparent not in the illusory mimesis of human experience and drama on stage, but in social relations in the street, in public practices of quotidian performances and experiences. His challenge is how to bring the street or the “mirror image of what [we] are” (Artaud *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings* 254) into the theatre.

¹ Cixous is also in conversation with the theories of Roland Barthes with his semiotic musings, Derrida's deconstruction, and Lacanian psychoanalytic crusades. These men in critical theory influenced some of the arguments she rejects, subverts, or embraces.

I explore Cixous' call for women to write their truth and Artaud's wish for a visceral theatre that exposes the reality playing outside the auditorium doors using intertextual correlations within one of many feminist theatre narratives;² in this case, through the lens of *l'écriture féminine*. I apply a rereading/retrospective engagement of Artaud's "No More Masterpieces" in conversation with *l'écriture féminine*. I search for how Artaud's texts, though often marked as indecipherable madness, channel potential experiments in feminist theatre practices and the action of performance as writing a text. This is an entreat for re-membering Artaud's often fragmented, slippery meanings through sympathies of Cixous' feminist writings on sexual difference.

Masterpieces and Woman's Textual Body

Artaud's essay, first published alongside his inspirational *Theater of Cruelty* manifestos, appeared within his influentially potent compilation book titled *The Theatre and Its Double*. In it, Artaud proposes a kind of theatrical spectacle that pursues dissolution and self-destruction as regenerative force to purge the excesses of literary value and canonizations of antiquated works. His theatre would "gain its vitality by shattering the process of representation and by curtailing the very idea of repetition. Artaud's theatrical spectacles would be unique gestural events with an immediate impact" (Barber 86). Cixous doubly revels in a social theatre performing dissolved ideologies, one that firmly destroys fixed representations of woman. So she dispenses an antidote in "The Laugh of the Medusa:"

² Elin Diamond's essay on the intersections of Brecht and feminism provides another example of the multitudinous methods applicable toward interpreting and comparing political/social/theoretical motivations for creating theatre. She writes, "[F]eminist theory and Brechtian theory are moving, changing discourses, open to multiple readings" (83). Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory/ Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *TDR* 32.1 (1988).

[A] feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the "truth" with laughter. (888)

For Cixous, the writing (laughing) woman subverts the "old property crust" of other writers who attempt to speak for her experience, pleasure, pain, and circumstance. By not blindly adhering to the standards imposed by male discourses, especially psychological treatises on "penis envy" or "phallic lack," she can disrupt institutional assumptions about woman's state of wellness or wholeness. Cixous claims that women are fragmentary in their psychology not through any lack, but because "she is a whole. . . composed of parts that are wholes . . . a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble" (889). The body is complete through a dance of complex pieces moving in endless directions and desires. This movement is a fluid passing that dares to challenge the frozen statues of tradition and form.

Cixous refers to stagnation, a staleness of presentation that Artaud abhors as well (*Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings* 259) in classic texts. Stagnation is revitalized through what Cixous calls a "women's imaginary," which consists of the overflowing and inexhaustible reinventions and creations yet to be explored in textual and performative forms. I find a corollary to this concept of reinvention in Artaud:

The masterpieces of the past are good for the past: they are not good for us. We have a right to say what has been said and even what has not been said in a way

which pertains to us, which is immediate and direct, which corresponds to present modes of feeling, and which everyone will understand. (252)

Artaud's pluralistic reference of "we" and "us" sets up a community of common assumptions. Artaud also points implicitly to those people in artistic and social power who produce performances of canonized dramatic masterpieces and philosophies of "quality" circulating within Western (or as Artaud prefers, Occidental) literature and arts for the sake of affirming particular bourgeois ideologies. Artaud, in essence, calls for a disruption in standards of what Pierre Bourdieu would refer as "taste." He writes, [art] and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu 7). What social differences emerge when women, from Cixous' perspective, inclined to reject cultural and patriarchal standards of "taste" that may inherently reject her experience, perform as text to be interpolated by a subjective audience? The question is answered in her declaratory charge of experimentation, boldness, and uninhibited writing she solicits in "Laugh of the Medusa."

For the time being, I will redefine Artaud's pronominal "we" from the above quote for a different, but relevant community: a "we/us" of women, of women writing a language unique unto themselves/herselves. Cixous defines her women as the following:

When I say 'woman,' I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. (876)

United women, for Cixous, are to write their struggle as well as their dreams into a new language of meanings and signs. I suggest that this language can extend into written

orthographic forms and the expression thereof through the medium of performance.

Under Cixous' terms, "she" is an imagined iconographic manifestation of an idealistic radical feminism in which "she" is capable of transforming a language and text, exhorted through performativity, that "corresponds to [her] present modes of feeling" (Artaud 252). Cixous highlights the power of language in social structures. Verena Conley writes in her interpretation of Cixous, "To change existing social structures, the linguistic clichés that purvey them and make them appear as transparent, immutable truths must be detected, re-marked, displaced" (44). Poetry becomes the primary textual mode of subversion for Cixous. In poetry, language is free, dense, and passionate; in other words, the purest manifestation of lived life. Cixous then ultimately questions differences of the flattened, literal divisions between theory and practice. Conley continues:

Cixous' concerns are political, but textually political, and states the premises (and limits) of her enterprise: to read and write texts in order to displace the operating concepts of femininity in major discourses governing (Western) society. (5)

It is at this point, in between the practice/theory dichotomy and the difficult task of matching experiential phenomenon into textual interpretation, where Artaud can assist in my experimental paralleling between the authors. If I extend Cixous' poetic "enterprise" to include the realm of performance, can woman's body become a text that is read by not only herself, but spectators, and other women within the sphere of feminist critical spectatorship? Artaud asserts, "Beneath the poetry of texts there is poetry pure and simple, without form and without text" (*Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings* 255). What is

this ineffable, formless, textless space Artaud imagines? Could I find traces within a particular performance genre, perhaps through feminist body art performance practices?

Hysterical Body and Orthographic Revolution

Women's (American and European) performance art in the 1990's and earlier dealt with an adventurous primitivist (though problematic through a postcolonial critique) approach to performing their experience; rather than adopting present forms and restructuring them (if not destroying them altogether), artists wanted to create new forms. Many women performance artists sought answers through conceptual digs into archetypical memory. The language they found and created was of an idyllic prehistoric, wildly free woman trapped inside contemporary cages. Or, as French feminist Luce Irigaray transfers from Freud, an archaic civilization would have another language and alphabet that expresses women's desire, as this language most likely differs from man's language of desire. Her language "probably has been covered by the logic that has dominated the West since the Greeks" (Irigaray "Demystifications" 101).

An example of language made into textual flesh I find in the documented account of Carolee Schneemans' *Interior Scroll* (1975) in which she pulls a scroll of paper from her vagina. Written onto this scroll of text fixed inside her body are words of a male film critic denouncing the relevance of female-produced work. Schneeman reinscribes her respondent criticism into a language that bore literally from within her naked, muddied, and savagely posed body. She speaks her words, "Pay attention to critical/and practical film language/it exists for and in only/one gender" (Schneider 132). In Schneeman's explicit performance, she attempts to destroy a hegemonic, male-dominated qualitative standard in film criticism and textual form. What the male critic obliged as insufficient

filmmaking by female producers, Schneeman asserts is a fault of an interpretive language that favors a male “perspectival vision.”³ To describe what he sees, he uses the *pater* (father/patriarch) language that fails to wholly comprehend what Cixous claims only a “*new insurgent writing*” (italics in original (880)) of female experience can articulate.

This “*new insurgent writing*” does not necessarily mean extinguishing linguistic signs and subjective referents for meaningless vocalizations of emotions or gibberish, though these are methods of disrupting the repetitive productions of masterpieces that Artaud proposes as viable alternatives in his neologisms or through his trance inducing, nonsensical but visceral glossalalia⁴. Cixous wishes women to snatch words in complete awareness of their word-power and then write themselves as/into/from text, voice and body, into ownership of her experiential self. She can, if she so chooses, question, subvert, or defy rules of grammar and style in her quest. I can look to Roland Barthes’s rustlings of language and its instability as doorways to shifting paradigms erected from fixity in language. He whimsically wonders:

If orthography were free—free to be simplified or not, according to the subject’s desire—it might constitute a very positive practice of expression; the written physiognomy of the word might acquire a properly poetic value, insofar as it emerged from the *scriptor*’s phantasms, and not from a uniform and reductive law...might one not say that in such

³ Rebecca Schneider writes about women performance artists who explicitly use their bodies as a kind of discourse on political, sexual, economic or racial issues. In her analysis of perspectivalist theory, women artists are “given to be seen but not given to see” (3). Their male counterparts carry the dominant tools of interpretation and the power of the gaze, while she has historically been subject to his watching and desiring fantasies.

⁴ In the beginning of his radio play “To Have Done with the Judgment of God (1941), Artaud begins by speaking nonsensical, but phonetically potent incantations. “Kré/kré/pek/kre/e/pte. /Puc te/puk te/li le/pek ti le/kruk” (Antonin Artaud, *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings*, trans. Helen Weaver, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

efflorescences as these the subject seeks his freedom: to trace, to dream to remember, to understand? Are there occasions when we encounter particularly 'happy' spelling mistakes—as if the *scriptor* were obeying not academic law but a mysterious commandment that comes to him from his own history—perhaps even from his own body? (44-45)

Barthes offers hope in a kind of orthographic revolution where a spelling mistake, perhaps based on a phonetic, aural understanding of a word, can reveal a more intimate and honest experiential expression. The scriptor (creator/speaker) can find his/her body through a reappropriation of language that bursts from the poetry of nuanced and individual expression, desire.

The recent work of performance artist, and Split Britches co-founder Deb Margolin plays this revolution of language for the textual body presence on stage. In her February 2005 piece, "Index to Idioms," Margolin subverts the culturally implicit meanings of idiomatic expressions. Idioms are grammatical constructions that often signify something other than literal interpretation of words. Performing solo before a screen that displays projected images relating to her autobiographical narratives, Margolin manages to seduce and shape word lexicons through idiomatic literalism. A phrase, "face the music," unravels as her multilayered experience while driving in a car and listening to music. The elderly women she sees outside the window seem to dance in choreographed harmony to the Doors' moody sounds in their song, "Riders on the Storm." Margolin stretches meaning of the idiom from an expression about accepting criticism for guilty actions, into the arena of pedestrian behavior, humanizing strangers using her imaginative witnessing with eloquent wit. She commits what she defines as

“ontological vandalism” as a feminist performance strategy in which her experiences as young woman, mother, artist and thinker are re-membered through a disruption of signifiers and linguistic references. In this way, Margolin rips apart then pieces back together the words of an idiom like pieces of her memory, body, and history.

Rather than in opposition to the orthographic laws of text inscribed into/onto her body, psyche and voice, an actress like Margolin performs on an imagined Cixous stage with her ever becoming “whole” identity carving pluralistically fluid canyons into mountains of hegemonic signs, erected and concretized in the patriarchal. Her voice is an aural manifestation of a written alphabet and syntactical style. Cixous illustrates: “Text: my body—shot through with screams of song” (882). The voice extends beyond rhetorical strategies or literature structures; it is her larynx, lungs and breath in active speech. The conventional actress, bound in tradition, inaccessible to her own dreamt language, had been reduced to speak the prescribed language of the father imposed upon and through her historically silenced body. She dumps this law of expression onto the stage before an audience expecting a repetitive memorial of masterpieces.

She has been trained according to a patriarchal writing system—an orthography. She can read, write and express herself through modes deemed linguistically unanimous and “correct” tools for eloquent and effective human communication. In the theatre, this communication transfers into facial and physical expressions in performance that inform witnessing. The shape of her hips, nose, face, arms or thighs we scrutinize in the labor of her movement or blocking. What would a *performative orthography* look like and can she subvert it, much like Barthes’s suggestion of intentionally misspelling a word, to claim ownership of her voice in a forest of (male-invented, law-stricken) signs?

Performance critic and theorist Elin Diamond applies the term anamorphosis, towards a subject imbued with a distorted image unless a shift in perspective intercepts interpretation. Diamond emphasizes that Freud's symptoms for hysteria include an excessive gestural, unstable state. Actresses like Elinor Duse fully exploited this form of theatrical expression for which she earned admiration and notoriety. In early Modernism, the woman performing grand gestures of hysteria became "a theatre of discovery" ("The Shudder of Catharsis" 157) for an all-too willing audience of amateur psychologists seated in the darkness of theatre halls.

For Artaud, the gesture is crucial to an expressive language. Gene Plunka writes that Artaud had been "[u]nable to reconcile the divorce between verbal and physical language, [so he] turned to sign language to reveal inner truth. Artaud lauded the value of nonverbal language as intuitive communication, unlike words, which must be deciphered by the mind" (26). Words cannot express the vault of emotional and psychological honesty that gestures employ in nonverbal precision. A frowning face, a skip, a stumble generate an enactment of a feeling much greater than words, especially when used in direct confrontation with an audience. A face frowns: we interpret sadness; a skip indicates play; a stumble iterates clumsiness or imbalance. A woman frowns: what assumptions pervert the gesture because of her gender?

Artaud hailed "violent physical images [that] pound and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator" which work towards "an exceptional force of redirection" (259). In the anamorphosis that shapes *l'écriture féminine* when applied onto a theatrical language, the gesturing body (as hysterical body), distorts and subverts an analytical oppression of a masculinist language of signs and criticism into a "unique language half-way between

gesture and thought” (*The Theatre and Its Double* 89). Artaud believes this language can be read, if not craved, by all the witnessing mass of audience. However, to apply this “unique language” as a kind of women’s *performative orthography* means to prevail into a darker, shoved away space in the psyche.

Dark Shades and Hidden Caves

Jane Goodall interprets meaning in Artaud’s texts vis-à-vis the mysteriously darker Gnostic drama and theosophy. The Theatre of Cruelty depends upon dissolution and “erasure of catastrophic difference” (104) between a subject’s suffering (or sentiments) and the force of suffering itself. Artaud screams for a reunification of body, mind, language and gesture through a theatrical restoration of fragmented identities. Theatre can “generate a counter-language whose grammar works on verbal signification in the same revelatory way as the plague does on material form” (Goodall 132). In Gnostic mythopoetics, willful goodness is the only combatant of permanent evil, darkness as omnipotent shadow that came before, and will forever dictate the movement of light. Artaud attests that we must continually exorcise the demons hovering over our innately divine selves. Goodall writes, “Where the voice of the subject in anguish expresses hysterical anxiety about dissolution as engulfment in demonized matter, the cruel consciousness voices a fierce determination to identify itself . . . with the dissolving energies of the plague” (104). The plague acts as natural exterminator of evil, rather than being evil itself. Theatre, as site of incarnated plague can “revolt against the dark forces of civilization” (2), not through a purging as in Aristotelian catharsis, but through audience immersion in “the alchemical transformation they are made to witness” (104). The affective result through witnessing the suffering (ideological, social, political) body

is a transformation of identity through a paradigmatic shift in subjective positioning.

When Anaïs Nin described Artaud's impromptu (re)enactment of the plague in a lecture, his intention was to erect an "applied consciousness" within the "semiotics of agony emerging from the text of performance" (Goodall 102).⁵ In other words, his physical language of suffering stemmed from the body's textual presence in gestural poetics. The referent subject was his ailing, mad, addicted, ghastly post-asylum body extending into representation of involuntary rupture foregrounding dissolution. The sick body was his canvas for a performative orthography unlike anything his contemporaries had witnessed before.

Cixous has a reverence for the darkness, and the wealth of expressive modes within it as well. But unlike Artaud's Gnostic mysticism of darkness being the home of demons pitted against the goodness of civilized humankind, darkness becomes a site of transgression and power reversal. To look into the darkness is to unwind the woman bound in the caverns of silence and oppression. The "dark is dangerous," she writes. "You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark" (878). Within the chambers of darkness, the womb where light does not penetrate except by penetration or a splitting open, is the powerful epicenter of woman's language. The forest is the site of signs, with Freud's hysterical case study, Dora, as the "mistress of the Signifier" (Cixous 886). The theatre of darkness is a theatre of a ruptured, distorted and transmuted feminized "hysteria," that torments spectators into frightful awakening/re-

⁵ From her diary, Nin writes, "[Artaud] forgot his lecture, the theatre, his ideas, Dr Allendy at his side. . . His face was convulsed in anguish and his hair soaked with sweat. His eyes dilated, his muscles seized up, his fingers struggled to maintain their flexibility. . . He was raging. He was delirious. He was representing his own death, his own crucifixion" (102). Quoted in Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1994).

birthing that something “other” than the well-lit canonized texts, repetitive themes, orthographic structures or myths of heroic triumphs over terrorized weaklings for male-centered narcissistic scopophilia pleasures playing out in performance.⁶ i

Applying Marc Silverstein’s analysis of Cixous’ theory of “body-presence” (or confrontation of truth and essence) described in her 1984 essay *Aller à la Mer*, the mad darkness that so plagued Artaud’s psychopathology repeats as transgressive activity in the enunciation of the woman actor. The actress (woman/body/subject) “transforms hysteria into a subversive performance, an active soliciting of the [psychoanalytic-] clinical gaze in order to reveal *its* [or *their/our* spectator positioning as metonymical clinicians determining] truth—its [*their/our*] complicity with a system of power threatened by a desire that must remain invisible and unnameable” (Silverstein 510). Cixous urges movement into the dark “unnameable”, for “we are black and we are beautiful” (878).⁷ Artaud calls for a descent into darkness as purgative force of rejuvenation through witnessing the horrors that lie therein. The horrors are the ruptures and breaks in language, signs and authenticity that have separated women’s bodies from agency to employ a feminist-narcissist expressive mode.

Inside Cixous’ phenomenological “body-presence” in theatrical spectacle, spectators are reborn through engulfment of a psychological, but necessary awareness of darkness; inside Artaud’s *Cruelty*, we are awakened “nerves and heart” by the darkness of reality employed into the traditionally mimetic theatre. Both authors reject “a theater of the image for a theater of being” (Silverstein 513). Theatre extends into waking life into dream into writing into performance.

⁶ See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (1975).

⁷ “Blackness” here I interpret not through post-colonialism, but rather as an absence of illumination or light, even though the phrase in English translates into an affirmative Black Panther slogan.

Plague as Social Disease

Artaud refutes bourgeois accusations that mass audiences are ignorant of the “sublime” in art forms; he blames not the people, but those manifestations of great masterpieces for being beyond their interpretive reach. The plague in *Oedipus Rex* is done through mimesis in “costumes and in language which have lost all contact with the crude and epileptic rhythm of our time” (252). For the purposes of rhetorical strategy, I align Artaud’s “plague” as misogyny, repression of women’s words, rejection of women’s socio-political liberation from “the narrow room in which [women have] been given a deadly brainwashing” (Cixous 877), lack of gendered economic equality, and internalized doubt of her agency in the world. If a male-dominated history has sublimated women to a status unworthy of linguistic, subjective, and desiring ownership, then she is a part of that ignoble mass in so much as Artaud describes:

[A] mass audience that trembles at train wrecks, that is familiar with earthquakes, plague, revolution, war, that is sensitive to the disorderly throes of love, is capable of reaching all these high ideas and asks only to be made aware of them, provided one speaks to them in their own language, and provided these ideas do not come to them by way of costumes and an overrefined language which belong to dead ages, ages that will never be brought to life again. (*Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings* 252-53)

Cixous’ *l’écriture féminine* offers a curative to an Artaudian-inspired plague seething within and circulating the exposure of so-called literary performance masterpieces that revel in masculinist canonical texts. Her “earthquakes” and “war” plucked from Artaud’s visions materialize as the constriction of a male-invented language incapable of writing

“woman’s imaginary.” To dissolve an obsession with resurrecting “dead ages,” women must “put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (875). Languages of the dead, of histories that have caged her voice for so long, she expires then reinvents in clamoring tongues of theatrical expression her “own language” of idealism and experience, her own orthographic forms.

For Cixous, radical feminist empowerment is a “process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another”; her “personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history” (882). In this manner, women can build a codex or dictionary of symbolism in orthographic and spoken language, replete with an almost metaphysical imaginative code of syntax, grammar and semiotics. It is in the establishment of her “self-seeking text”(889), in discoveries of herself found through a process of writing Cixous calls *l’écriture féminine*, that opens the possibility for a counter-hegemonic impression of woman’s body as performative text. *L’écriture féminine* can be a method applied towards interpreting, reading and writing women and their performing bodies.

Artaud proposes a theatre that “consists of curing a patient by having him assume the external attitude of the state one would like to restore him [her] to” (*Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings* 257). This theatre would be a purgative force of healing that cures the plagued body from the deathly illness. If, as speculated earlier, plague is a social and ideological pestilence, like sexist assumptions of female placement in domesticated, maternal roles, and language transmits this plague through orthography or speech, then what amazing ruptures can I see if language, moving in viral rapidity with an affect of infectious mutations, reshapes itself toward the feminine, the woman’s world, *her*

“perspectival vision.”⁸ Thus, the plague of masterpieces mutates, theoretically, into an inexhaustible “production of forms. . . a composition, something beautiful” (Cixous 876). Anamorphic images shape the theatre into a heterogeneous, gestural language of nature, desire, meaning and the embodiment of these woman-texts into performance.

Dangerous Disruption of the Split

The combustion of binaries (male/female, black/white) is a dangerous threat to our social networks and structures. As Rebecca Schneider describes:

The danger inherent in binary explosion—the fear unleashed in close interrogation of our distinctions—is manipulated with political purpose in contemporary feminist performative interrogations of social symbolic constructs made explicit across literal bodies. (14)

Aratud sought a “binary explosion, specifically the collapse of socially coded distinctions between mind and matter” (Schneider 14). In *l’écriture féminine*, the woman’s mind creates her body, her material reality self-determined by a revolutionary set of linguistic signifiers. The Cartesian mind/body split (“I think, therefore I am”) is a cliché of dominance through a philosophy of mind dominating the body. I ask, how can woman allow her body to speak if a patriarchal binary split legitimizes her speaking, which funnels through flattening and systematic encasements of a conscription of syntax and grammar? How can the body speak *its* mind, rather than mind speaking for the body?

For Cixous, the mind that produces and formulates a process of writing from ineffable thoughts and ideas generated from experience or an active imaginary is

⁸ Rebecca Schneider writes about women performance artists who explicitly use their bodies as a kind of discourse on political, sexual, economic or racial issues. In her analysis of perspectivalist theory, women artists are “given to be seen but not given to see” (3). Their male counterparts carry the dominant tools of interpretation and the power of the gaze, while she has historically been subject to his watching and desiring fantasies.

inextricably linked with the body that feels, absorbs, makes love, and dies. From textual production of experiential interpretation, the woman's bodily sensuousness is a language bound up in historical repression. It is through the work of performance artists using their bodies as text that a language of women's experience can be fully expressed.

Indeed, Amelia Jones suggests:

Body art is . . . a set of performative practices that, through [an] intersubjective engagement, instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism. . . . When it is engaged with through a phenomenologically informed feminism, body art can open up the entire domain of art interpretation, encouraging the development of a new reading praxis that acknowledges the masculinist, racist, homophobic, and classist assumptions underlying the disciplines of art history and criticism and their rhetoric of 'disinterested' aesthetic judgment and historical narration. (1, 19)

Cixous proclaims that the "builders of the analytic empire" (892), who constructed the assumptive disciplines Amelia Jones refers to above, may repeatedly try to seduce women into compliance with their definitive meanings, even after each masterful theory women may have smashed falls to the ground. They may be coaxed into embracing burgeoning theories that, however revolutionary they may appear initially, are substantially supported by the old. The "new old men" bring the women back, "[l]uring them with flashy signifiers, the demon of interpretation—oblique, decked out in modernity—sells them the same old handcuffs, baubles and chains" (892). Cixous refers to poststructural and postmodern thinkers who entice the New Woman into trappings that

lead back to the same string she seeks to break. “Take a look around, then cut through” (892)!

The splitting of the body, a cutting through of thought, Luce Irigaray locates in the vulva. She asserts that woman constantly “‘touches herself’ for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact” (*This Sex Which Is Not One* 24), in opposition to the phallus which needs an instrument such as “his hand, [or] language” (24). Her autoeroticism, her phenomenological production of pleasure, desire, language, becomes “disrupted by a violent break-in: the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis” (24). In this way, woman’s body is his canvas for expression, an incisive cutting through to make meaning of his pleasurable experience.

Fluxus female artists in the 1960’s transgressed the entrapment of being the inspiration or even instrument of art as Yves Klein had done with his 1960 piece “Antropometries.” Naked women danced, rubbed, and slid across a large canvas, imprinting blue paint with their bodies for a male artist’s inclinations. In 1965, Shigeko Kubota painted while squatting onto the page, the brush appearing to extend from her vagina. She subverted the “action painting” attributed to über-masculine art icon, Jackson Pollock by situating and owning her body expression into textual production. Her split body was her exaggeratedly feminine “menstrual gestural” (Jones 98) body.⁹ Kubota’s *Vaginal Painting* explicitly evokes a dangerous disruption of a gendered binary that marks women’s work as lacking when compared to high art’s institutional and aesthetic

⁹ Amelia Jones analyses this and other embodied feminist performances in her book *BodyArt*. Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

judgment. Kubota's "lack" she stuffs then writes her creative force through the incisive split that separates her sex from his.¹⁰

Writing, in almost any language, translates its root as "to cut" or "incise." The cutting of clay to scribe in cuneiform I will reclaim as metaphor of woman cutting through the block of hegemony to script her meaning from within into posterity, like the scrolls hanging in museums for inspection. (Did women write onto these tablets?) Writing is her cutting into a mountain, a wall, a page for others (namely inspired women) to read, translate and linguistically reformulate. The body on stage as canvas, she uses to write with gesture, sound and presence. She runs her risks (893) as Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty is a risk "worth taking" (*Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings* 259). That risk is bound up in the unknown, the mysterious miasmic endeavor of expressing the intricate nuances of woman's desire, thought and meaning.

Artaud writes in *Theatre and Its Double*, "the belief in a fluid materiality of the soul is indispensable to the actor's craft" (135). Passions for Artaud are material manifestations of desire and motives, relevant abstractions of reality for actor training and performance. The actor's body expresses the force of soul, which if harnessed as theatrical manifestation, can culminate into profound, ecstatic, almost shamanic experiences for the actor upon audiences. The breath within the body allows access into moments of theatrical transformations: "For if knowledge of breathing makes clear the soul's color, it can with all the more reason stimulate the soul and encourage its blossoming" (136). Cixous has Medusa's laughter supported by the perpetually

¹⁰ Artaud has used his blood from self-mutilation to write spells and incantations to friends he would either wish for harm or good. These letters often had burn marks from cigarettes, or stains from other liquids, which haunted the page in a monstrous glow. See Paule Thévenin, *Antonin Artaud and Jacques Derrida, Antonin Artaud: Dessins Et Portraits* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1986).

stimulating, splitting, though healthy, inspiration/expiration of breath in diaphragm
seizures. The breath (of life) is also the subversive “laugh” performed by woman’s body.
Let us remember this masterpiece of the body: breath remains genderless and sexless.

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