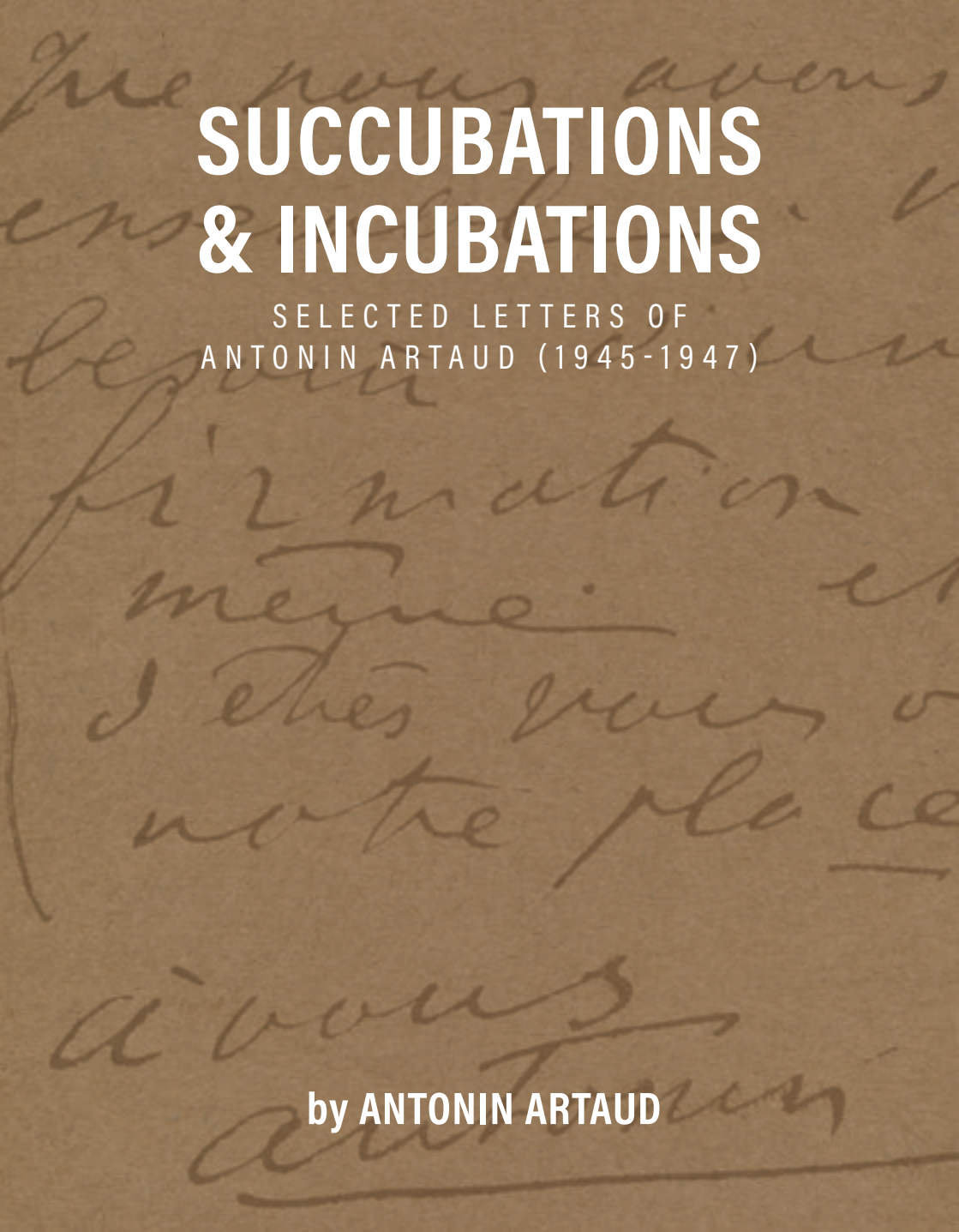
SUCCUBATIONS & INCUBATIONS

SELECTED LETTERS OF
ANTONIN ARTAUD (1945-1947)



by ANTONIN ARTAUD

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SELECTED LETTERS OF
ANTONIN ARTAUD (1945-1947)

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SELECTED LETTERS OF ANTONIN ARTAUD (1945-1947)

Translated by

Peter Valente & Cole Heinowitz

with an introduction by

Jay Murphy

Artworks by

Martin Bladh & Karolina Urbaniak

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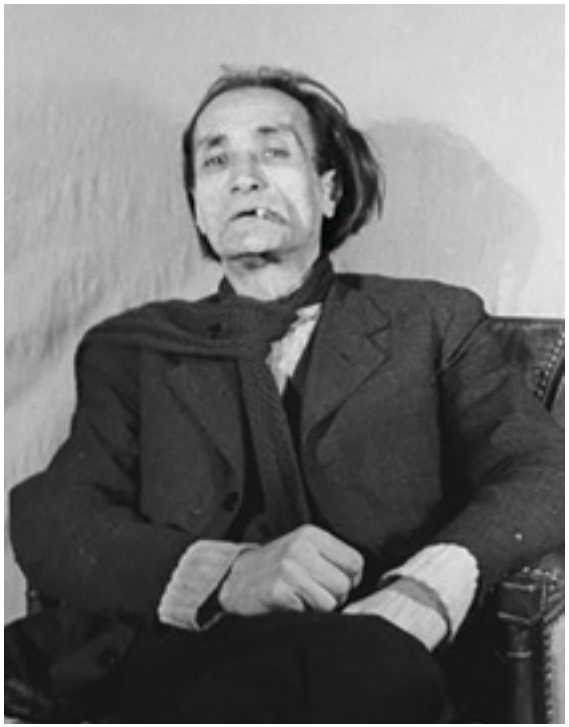

Antonin Artaud

Photograph by Denise Colomb, 1947

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INTRODUCTION

by Jay Murphy

Artaud writes he “was never born,” and “will never die.“ But in this exact period of missives, collected and translated by Peter Valente and Cole Heinowitz, Artaud is also overwhelmingly aware that, at least in this form of life, that he has put in question from his earliest writings, he is about to die. So this is the penumbra cast over these ‘late letters.’ Often refused opiates in the asylum for intestinal pains Artaud complained of, the doctors thinking Artaud was merely gaming for drugs, these were likely the first symptoms of the rectal cancer Artaud developed. Not told of this eventual medical diagnosis, nevertheless Artaud realized an end was near. One of Artaud’s very closest confidants, one of his *filles du coeur, naître*, Paule Thévenin, claimed Artaud died when and likely how he wanted. This doesn’t mean Artaud didn’t see his death as a major defeat. As he frequently alludes in these letters, there is no death that is not a result of someone’s

will, or malevolent magick. Artaud realized he, too, was succumbing:

> And they have pushed me over
>
> into death;
>
> there where I ceaselessly eat
>
> cock
>
> anus
>
> and caca
>
> at all my meals,
>
> all those of THE CROSS.

This fuels an extreme urgency: it is as if each letter, fragment, exclamation, dictation, *gris gris* or drawing, not only relatively 'finished' works like Artaud's remarkable radio broadcasts, are not only a stance of counter-sorcery, while constituting a *sort* or spell themselves, but are an ongoing dynamic last will and testament. Artaud conveys this is a final battle, as he envisages defenders converging from across the world, since a "small army is necessary", even as he describes this as a cosmological conflict that has already gone on for aeons. Like the rest of Artaud's enormous corpus of writings (the 24 volumes of the Gallimard complete works being left

unfinished), his letters herein careen from the eminently practical and precise, to the visionary and fantastical, to paranoiac and mystifying, no surprise given such threatening views incurred psychiatric retribution. Artaud consistently claimed all poetry, even "all language/is untranslatable", yet Artaud against all odds often produces a communicable world, certainly a contagion with his close associates, still uncannily projected to us some seventy years later.

The band of literati who succeeded in freeing Artaud from the Rodez asylum in May, 1946 were a rich lot, though sometimes they were disparaged as Artaud continues to be. Marthe Robert had already jump-started her work in Paris as a singular literary critic and translator, a career she continued until her death in 1996. Robert's defense and elaboration of Artaud is not surprising for one who jousted with Jean-Paul Sartre concerning Flaubert, mercilessly critiqued the dominant approaches to the writing of Franz Kafka, was a champion of other dislocated writers who slipped past group identification and sometimes normative social definitions of 'sanity' – Heinrich von Kleist, Robert Walser, among others. She joined Artaud's circle as an intellectual as well as erotic, daughter. Henri Thomas was at the time of these letters already an accomplished novelist and poet, and literary secretary to André Gide, himself a consistent friend and supporter of Artaud in

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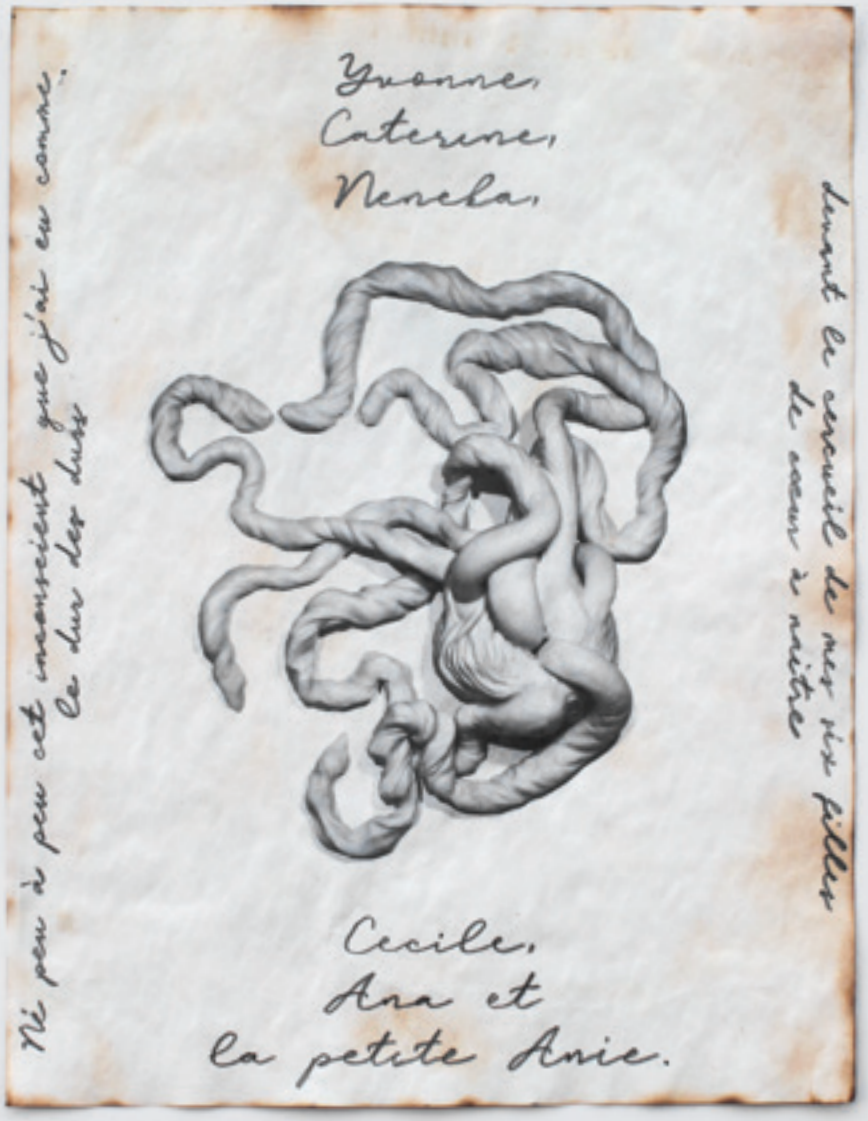


To Jean Dubuffet Rodez,
November 29, 1945

My very dear friend,

Yesterday I took the liberty of entrusting you with a letter for René de Solier[1] whose address I do not know. Excuse me for this, but I heard that René de Solier was worried and I wanted to reassure him. Because, my dear Jean Dubuffet, things are not as they appear in everyday life. The world we inhabit is an unrealized world where the person you greet on the street turns out to be a double who from a distance appears like a blind wall; jealous, he *bewitches* you because he thinks you have more genius, consciousness, personality, soul, and physical density than he does, and he works by all necessary means to abduct your being and consciousness for his own. This was not commonly known until recently but now it has become a fact that no one can ignore, yet which the full force of wickedness and universal criminality still works to prevent from being publicly acknowledged. It has been a long time, Jean Dubuffet, since these have been individualized maneuvers, reduced and

1 René de Solier was a French historian and art critic. Very little is known about his life, apart from his books.

confined to a few specific individuals who practice black magic at home; these are public maneuvers in which the whole population of Paris participates, in Paris, and in the countrysides and fields of France, under the influence of these waves of bewitchment cast from Afghanistan, Turkey, Burma, Bengal, and Tibet. —And the *masses* of all the Catholic churches of the earth are used to support these bewitchments which sweep over, at times, and asphyxiate all conciousnesses: yours, Jean Paulhan's, René de Solier's, all my friends', that of all those like you and me who want to defend their personality against intrusion by the petit-bourgeois rapacity of the priests, the shopkeepers, the employees of the administration, the clerks, the workers, and all this horrible vomiting of wickedness, jealousy, selfishness, and utter stupidity which comprises the whole of humanity and which assembles at all hours of the day in groups in the streets of Paris, on the forecourts of churches or cathedrals (Saint-Augustin, Notre-Dame-des-Champs, Notre-Dame de Paris) like other populations that congregate in the streets of Delhi in the Indies or on the slopes of the Himalayas etc., etc. I do not have to hide from you the fact that I am the reason for all these bewitchments whose secret aim is to make me lose my personality and my consciousness, to take over my body and replace it with a soul other than my own, one as cowardly and vile as that of all beings, that is to say, given over to all base acts, which is a stupidity, an absurdity, an idiocy, and on

top of that, plain muck. I do not even know by what absurd villainy all men on earth, just about, have come to take me for the central object of all their impure desires and their suggestions to be vile, dishonest, messy, as without honor or consciousness as they are, but it is a fact that I am surrounded day and night by an obscene horde of recriminating jackals, black magicians, succubi, and incubi who masturbate the soul, who are not the demons of Martin Schongauer or of Brueghel the Elder, but of Mr. Durand, Mr. Dupont, Mr. Cop, Mr. Priest, Mr. Abbot, Mr. Monk, Mr. Doctor, Mr. Rabbi, Mr. Imam, Mr. Brahmin, Mr. Lama, Mr. Everyone, etc. We are all suffering from this state of things and all the more since it is protected by the police who are under the thumb of these black magicians, except for some agents who quit out of disgust.

You do not ignore the fact that I am, myself, Antonin Artaud, the same Artaud who in 1917 raised the population of Marseilles for two days to put an end to this state of affairs, after which I was called by all the bourgeoisie and their journals Saint Tarto, or as one would say, cream tart, slice of bread, or little smidgeon.

In 1927 there was an article in *les Nouvelles littéraires* where at the bottom of a page a paragraph was devoted to ridiculing Saint Tarto, following a battle against the police that took place on the Place Blanche and where André Breton

Rodez, 1946

Quatre-Mares, Sotteville-les-Rouen, 1937

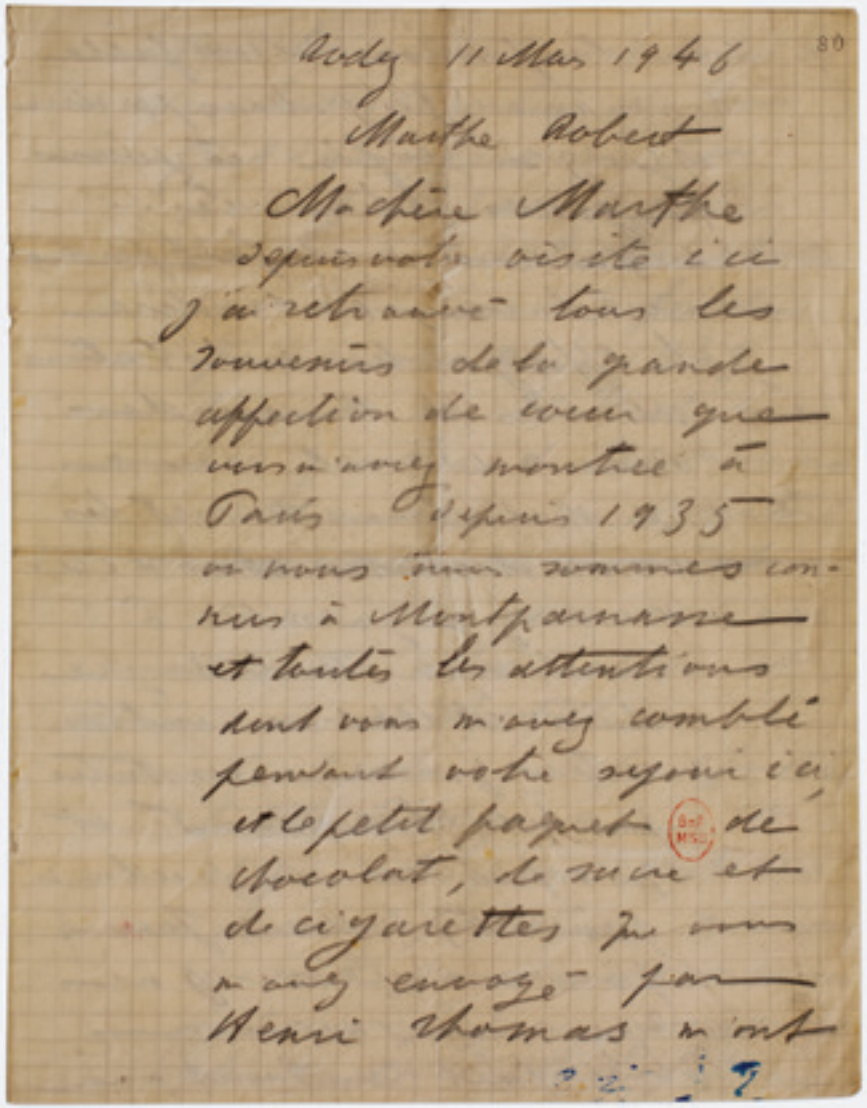
also fought like a fanatic, but this battle did not only take place on the Place Blanche; it spread to all the spheres of the earth because André Breton, several surrealists like Pierre Unik, Marcel Noll, Jacques-André Boiffard and, I believe, André Masson and Roland Tual, affirmed that we were bewitched and that we saw in the streets of Paris a group of women, their skirts lifted up, casting on us their waves of obscene sexual imbecility and magic. Your exposition of 1925 or 1927 was not understood, that the genius of a drawing is not in its artfulness but in the action of the forces that directed the calculation of forms and signs that the drawn lines neglect, form, evacuate, and make one regret, and this often takes more than genius to recognize. I shoot from here at all the sorcerers I see with my breath and the physical bars in my bewitched body, for sorcerers do not accept signs, but this state of things must cease and all souls with hearts like yours and mine must be able to breathe.

Yours with all heart.

Antonin Artaud.

P. S. —Now that you know my whole story and now that today, November 29, 1945, between 11 o'clock this morning and 3 o'clock this afternoon, we have seen each other from afar, and that you have helped me to sing, and that we have sung together, and that we have seen each other as we did at Gethsémani and in front of I do not know what cloister of the past, I also cannot hide from you the fact that they martyrize in the same way they did to me the few persons whose addresses I have given to you in order to prevent them from coming to me. Besides, you have seen all six of them: Catherine Chilé, Neneka Chilé, Cécile Schramme, Yvonne Chilé, Ana Corbin, Anie, and you cannot doubt that they are, all six, my true daughters.[2]

2 During the time Artaud was writing the letters from Rodez, he was working to rebuild his biography, to reconstruct a life that had been almost destroyed during his nine years in asylums, and he gave to it a kind of mythical dimension. The man whom society had rejected, isolated in the asylums and, in a certain way, tried to sterilize, had created a family of six girls who defied space and time: Catherine and Neneka Chilé (an important patronym which will appear often in these letters; the name was transcribed as Chile in the registry of civil status in Marseille, where Artaud was born on September 4th, 1896): Catherine Chilé had married Marius-Pierre Artaud, his paternal grandfather; Mariette Chilé, whom her grandchildren will call Miette or Neneka, had married Louis Nalpas, his maternal grandfather. Yvonne Allendy was an old friend from the 1920s. It was through her and her husband, the psychiatrist, René Allendy, that Artaud came into contact with Anaïs Nin. Yvonne had been diagnosed with cancer, and died on August 23, 1935, at the age of forty-four. In the letters these patronyms would undergo several permutations. Artaud had met Anie Besnard one evening on the Boulevard du Montparnasse when she was sixteen; she was crying and sitting on a bench; he had approached her and tried to comfort her. Artaud identified Ana Corbin as someone who worked on Carl Dreyer's film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. That is all that is known about her.


Rodez 11 Mars 1946
Martha Robert
Madame Martha
Depuis votre visite ici
j'ai retrouvé tous les
souvenirs de la grande
affection de cœur que
vous m'avez montrée à
Paris depuis 1935
où nous fûmes voisines con-
tre à Montparnasse
et toutes les attentions
dont vous m'avez comblé
pendant votre séjour ici,
et le petit paquet de
chocolat, de sucre et
de cigarettes je vous
m'avez envoyé par
Henri Thomas m'est

Cécile Schramme,[3] as Paulhan[4] has told me, effectively died in 1940 and after being angry with each other we were reconciled before her death, but her soul came back in a young girl who knows me very well; she is also called Cécile but she cannot come to me either, another of these daughters of my heart, a young girl named Neneka Chilé, is a young Afghani about 20 years old who translated *Art and Death* in Afghanistan and who having left Afghanistan more than a year ago still has not reached the end of her journey to me, another one, and she is my first daughter, Catherine Chilé, was a nurse at the Hospital Saint-Jacques; she left Paris in May 1945 and has still not arrived, as for Anie Besnard, it is more complicated. I learned that she left Paris to join me on October 14, 1944, with everything I needed. I heard and saw that she had fallen into an

3 Artaud had plans to marry Cécile Schramme at the end of 1936. She was still alive in 1945, and Artaud, when he returned to Paris, attempted to find out what had become of her. He contacted Alix Guillain, whom he met on the eve of a trip she had to make to Brussels, in order to inquire about her. Alix Guillain was able to find her, hospitalized in a sanatorium, and went to visit her there. According to her, Cécile Schramme was aged beyond her years, her face partially paralyzed, and her complexion, formerly so radiant, was irretrievably spoiled. She declared that she no longer wanted to hear anything about Antonin Artaud. Her insistent visitor asked her if she had had any message to convey to Artaud; Cécile replied that she had only one thing to say, and it was that now she was entirely busy writing. Alix Guillain had retained from this visit the impression of a nightmare. When she returned to Paris she thought it best to keep quiet rather than to tell Artaud such a disappointing truth. Alix Guillain was a journalist and translator, anarchist and communist activist.

4 Jean Paulhan was a legendary editor and publisher of important French literature. He was the editor of the journal *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF) from 1925 to 1940 and from 1946 to 1968.

ambush along the way, that she had been assassinated there and her corpse reduced to dust and thrown to the winds, and that to conceal this disappearance and this assassination the police, who are among the initiated, put in her place a double upon which the initiates bestowed the memory of the life of Anie Besnard, which explains why Anie Besnard, knowing I was in the most extreme need and having received money from me before my departure for Ireland, did not even bother to send me a word since your visit to her for I would have realized that the handwriting was not that of my friend Anie.

My dear Jean Dubuffet, I have an account at the Bank of France.[5] Someone made me forget this because they were jealous of the sum, but I just remembered. I urgently ask you to demand that the whole of the sum representing my account be given to you because I need it to make my journey to Tibet and to support my family over there.

P. S. —Friends from Ireland will give you a hand in regaining possession of this sum in gold. It was brought back to me from the Indies by a friend.

5 Here Artaud begins to elaborate on the existence of a bank account containing a large sum of money in gold bars. In the following letters he will ask Jean Dubuffet to act on his behalf to withdraw the amount. The Bank would eventually contact Dubuffet with the news that no such account existed.

To Madame Jean Dubuffet

Rodez, November 29, 1945

Dear Madame and great friend,

I wanted to specially thank you for your very affectionate attentions in sending me butter, sardines, and green coffee, that is, for understanding that it was the absence of fats and my state of malnutrition that caused the state of disarray where, at certain hours of the day, the consciousnesses of all my friends are swept away by a destroying wind blown by the maneuvers of obscene bewitchment by monks in the Himalayas and the populations of Burma, Bengal, Turkestan, and Afghanistan. At times, the people of Paris and other cities in France involve themselves in these hateful, dissociative maneuvers as well as, at certain hours, *under the protection of the police*, as I told you. — This abominable state of affairs must cease for if, as you know, I am full of hatred for Jesus Christ, I am equally full of hatred for the antichrist, who was never more than his minion and an object of his bewitchment. I went to Mexico, to the summit of a mountain more than five thousand meters high, to put a stop to certain christ-like maneuvers of white magic from which all black magic was always fomented, both directly by the spirit of contradiction and also by another spirit that never tolerated the white. I will therefore go, and

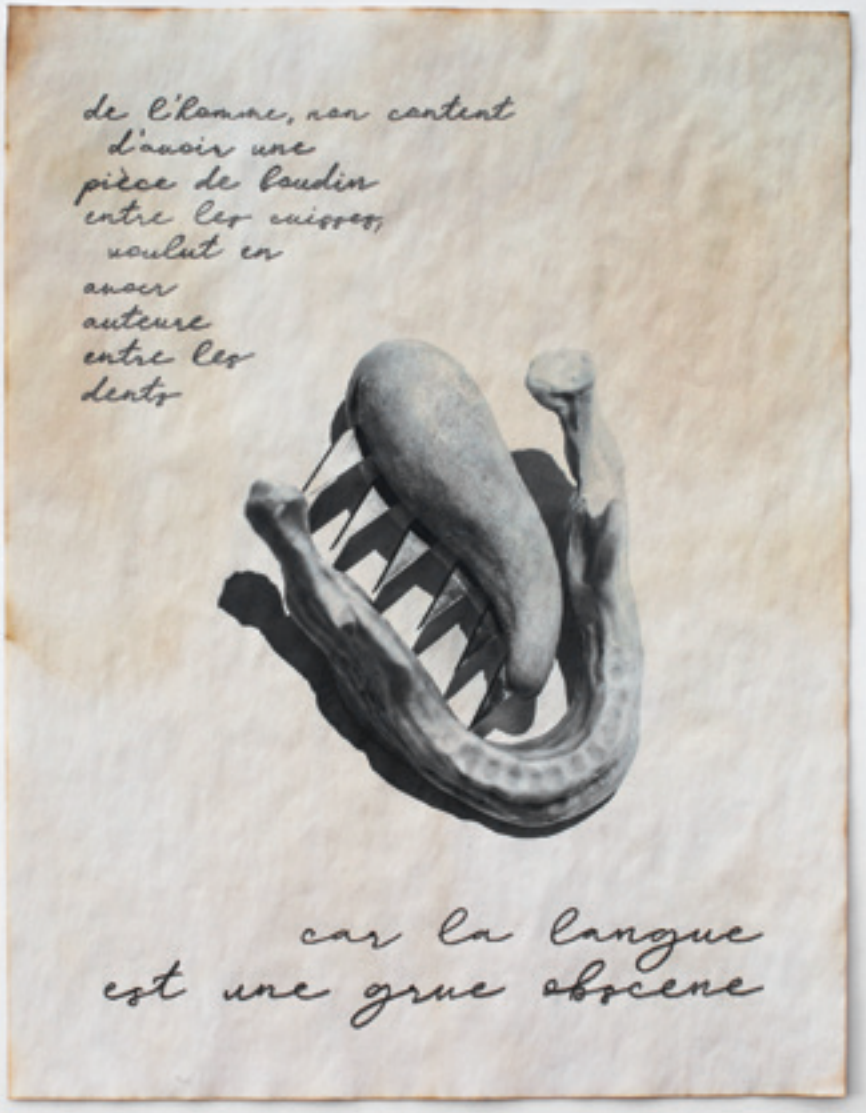
BIOGRAPHIES

Antonin Artaud

Antonin Artaud's work has a world-renowned status for experimentation across performance, film, sound, poetry and visual art. In the 1920s, he was a member of the Surrealist movement until his expulsion, and formulated theoretical plans across the first half of the 1930s for his 'Theatre of Cruelty' and attempted to carry them through. He made a living as a film actor from 1924 to 1935 and made many attempts to direct his own film projects. In 1936, he travelled to Mexico with a plan to take peyote in the Tarahumara lands. In 1937, preoccupied with the imminent apocalypse, he travelled to Ireland but was deported, beginning a nine-year asylum incarceration during which he continued to write and also made many drawings. After his release in 1946, he lived in the grounds of a sanatorium in Ivry-sur-Seine, close to Paris, and worked intensively on drawings, writings and sound-recordings. He died on 4 March 1948. His drawings have been exhibited on several occasions, notably at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna in 2002 and at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in 2006.

Peter Valente

Peter Valente is the author of *A Boy Asleep Under the Sun: Versions of Sandro Penna* (Punctum Books), which was nominated for a Lambda award, *The Artaud Variations* (Spuyten Duyvil), *Let the Games Begin: Five Roman Writers* (Talisman House), *The Catullus Versions* (Spuyten Duyvil), two books of photography, *Blue* (Spuyten Duyvil) and *Street Level* (Spuyten Duyvil), two translations from the Italian, *Blackout* by Nanni Balestrini (Commune Editions) and *Whatever the Name* by Pierre Lepori (Spuyten Duyvil), *Two Novellas: Parthenogenesis & Plague in the Imperial City* (Spuyten Duyvil), a collaboration with Kevin Killian, *Ekstasis* (blazeVOX) and the poetry chapbook, *Forge of Words a Forest* (Jensen Daniels). He is the co-translator of the chapbook, *Selected Late Letters of Antonin Artaud, 1945-1947* (Portable Press @ Yo-Yo Labs). Forthcoming is his translation of *Nicolas Pages* by Guillaume Dustan (Semiotext(e), 2020), and a collection of essays, *Essays on the Peripheries* (Punctum, 2019). In 2010, he turned to filmmaking and has completed sixty shorts to date, twenty-four of which were screened at Anthology Film Archives in NYC.



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Artworks p. 31, 73, 113, 149, 182, 200.

© Karolina Urbaniak

, 1946

This selection of letters (1945-1947) from Artaud's consummate work, *Suppôts et Suppliciations* [Henchmen and Torturings] translated into English for the first time, provides readers with a vivid, uniquely intimate view of Artaud's final years. They show Artaud at his most exposed, and they are perhaps his most explosive, tragic, sad, even humorous.
Each of the correspondents that came into contact with Artaud during this time were in their own way deeply affected since his project was essentially an "attack / on the mind of the public."

Commenting on and elaborating key themes from his earlier writing, while venturing into new territory, Artaud recounts his torture and violation in asylums, his crucifixion two thousand years ago in Golgotha, his deception by occult initiates and doubles, and his intended journey to Tibet, where, aided by his "daughters of the heart," he will finally put an end to these "maneuvers of obscene bewitchment." Artaud also speaks of his plan to create a "body without organs" and extends this idea to the visual arts, where he argues that painting and drawing must wage a ceaseless battle against the limits of representation.

The apocalyptic vision for mankind that led Artaud on a journey, beginning in Mexico in 1936 and ending, tragically, in Ireland in 1937, with a mental breakdown, silence, and a long internment in asylums, concluded with the extremely prolific late period from which these letters were drawn. There is an unmistakable unity of vision that permeates the letters: the vision of an unceasing, ubiquitous, and malignant plot "to close the mouth of lucidity" by any means, and which must be resisted at all costs.

This translation of Artaud's letters by Peter Valente and Cole Heinowitz includes an introduction by Jay Murphy, a selection of facsimiles from Artaud's handwritten manuscript and is illustrated by Martin Bladh and Karolina Urbaniak.

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