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Artaud and the Importance of Being Rude

*Catherine Dale*

This anger which consumes me and which I learn every day to put to better use must certainly mean something.

Artaud 1976, 400

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Refusing the twentieth-century’s eviscerating professionalisation of anger is one of Antonin Artaud’s imperatives.¹

To agree to burn as I have burned all my life and as I burn now is also to acquire the power to burn; and I know that I was predestined to burn, this is why I believe I can say that few angers can reach where my anger will be able to rise.

(Artaud 1976, 401)

Artaud’s display of anger and rudeness, both in his scandalous theatrical performances and on the page in his rancorous diatribes against the narrow-minded and the banal, is possibly the most famous – in the sense of familiar to his contemporaries and present readers alike – of all his putative idiosyncrasies. Despite this renown, Artaud’s most identifiable characteristics are usually reduced to biographical information about drug addiction, schizophrenia, celibacy and religious fanaticism, while little mention is made of his ire, which in its fluidity, appears to transcend systematic classification. Thus paradoxically, Artaud’s anger is taken up as both an indeterminate force and a familiar feature. It is a paradox that underscores the process whereby anger is captured and categorised as a particular illness, syndrome or crime, or alternatively, deployed as a creative impulse and romanticised as a force of artistic production.

Artaud’s very public hostility enhances both his clinical status as a madman as well as the critical reception of his work. Yet the popularity of Artaud’s aggressive and violent writings, drawings and performances is limited. Inevitably, his productions are seen as unpalatable or boring and

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are then categorised as products (symptoms) of mental disturbance or rejected as part of a tedious and nonsensical routine. Despite the vagaries of the art market, however, Artaud continues to encourage the image of the mentally disturbed writer, performer and artist but for reasons other than popularity. Artaud insists that mental disturbances have something of the utmost importance to say. Hence, he is not against the prodigal claims, whether complementary or critical, built around an ideal nexus of the visionary, the genius and the mad-man.

The lucid powers of the imagination are rarely listened to outside the pathologist’s clinic. In this sense, Artaud is an important ‘mad-man’ because he demands to be taken seriously in both critical as well as clinical terms simultaneously. In an early letter to the publisher Jacques Rivière, Artaud writes, ‘I am a man who has greatly suffered in the mind, and as such I have the right to speak’ (Artaud 1965, 12). Artaud is less interested in the outcome or reception of his speech than in possessing the right to ‘speak’ at all. He emphasises not teleology (the finished product) but the infinite process of creating because despite popular, romantic and continuous interest in the analysis of insanity, especially in relation to genius, no such sustained curiosity attends those who enact disagreeable public displays of anger, frustration and rudeness. It is this unpopular and unattractive madness – after all madness is both an ethical and an aesthetic affair – that has been allowed to become boring and is for the most part only caricatured, incarcerated and ignored. Artaud’s letters to Rivière exercise the right to speak by attempting to explain over and over, and much to the bewilderment of their addressee, the most unpleasant aspects of the process of writing.

A general ignorance towards madness is one of the central issues of Artaud’s ‘Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society’, a work for which Artaud received his only literary award. Van Gogh, writes Artaud, ‘did no more than cut off his left ear’ (Artaud 1965, 135). Van Gogh is not mad, he is only thought so by ‘bourgeois inertia’ and its ‘organised crime’ ‘in a world in which every day they eat vagina cooked in green sauce or the genitals of a new born child whipped into a rage plucked as it came out of the maternal sex’ (Artaud 1965, 135). Artaud includes himself and Van Gogh in an elite coterie of persecuted sages alongside Gerard de Nerval, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edgar Allen Poe and the Comte Lautréamont. These figures have been suicided by a society which cannot distinguish between the idea of madness as an irrational force able to combat the petty, banal and ultimately destructive elements of reason, and the idea of madness as an irrational and incomprehensible force fit only for incarceration and death.

Artaud’s essay on Van Gogh implies the introduction of a distinction between aggressive and insane madness. The etymology of both uses of mad, aggression and insanity, is the Old English word for insanity gemâd. If we take insanity as the primary or fixed meaning of gemâd, it becomes