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Reconsidering the Avant-Garde through Ritual

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Clodagh Emoe

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Undisciplined Disciplines

Reconsidering the Avant-Garde through Ritual

Clodagh Emoe

This essay seeks to challenge, albeit in a modest capacity, the ostensible understanding of the avant-garde as a failed project. While acknowledging the criticisms arguing the failure of the avant-garde to motivate a new social order by leading cultural commentators, such as Raymond Williams and Peter Bürger, this essay follows critic Hal Foster's retroactive model of art and theory to reconsider the avant-garde under conditions of enquiry that focus on the enactment of alternate modalities — this being ritual theory. A key concern of Fosters "new articulation" of the avant-garde is an understanding of the critical capacity of art by its potential in forming contestatory moments and spaces. (1) Foster, *The Return of the Real*, The MIT Press, 1996, p. xviii. **Rather than considering the avant-garde as a failed project it seems more productive to encounter this from a trans-historical perspective, beyond a chronologically rooted position. This reconsideration is carried out by revisiting the night of the première of *Ubu Roi*, at the *Théâtre de l'Oeuvre* on 10th of December 1896, a pivotal moment in the early avant-garde through the "synchronic" rubric of ritual theory.** (2) Foster uses the terms diachronic and synchronic to imply a historical and social axes (respectively) in art and theory**. The ritual as an anthropological interpretation of a symbolic and cultural apparatus provides a theoretical vantage point to tease out the complexity and potential of artistic forms, exemplified in this essay by the première of *Ubu Roi*, and initiate a reconsideration of the project of**

the avant-garde as mobilizing the condition and space of potential.

Rather than the content of the play — a five act satire developed from a schoolboy farce, it is the circumstances that ensued on the night of the première of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896) that is considered a "landmark" moment in European theatre and understood as the first example of the Theatre of the Absurd. (3) Tiffany, Dana, (1988), "Jarry's Inner Circle and the Public Debut of Père Ubu" in *"Event" Arts and Art Events*, Stephen C. Foster (ed.), USA:(University of Iowa, UMI Research) p. 35. In striving to provoke the shock of the new in polite bourgeois society by causing a near riot, this moment is recognized as revolutionising forms of artistic practice.

Although the writer and director Alfred Jarry did not discuss his artistic practices and activities in terms of ritual, the cultural theorist Dana Tiffany suggests that *Ubu Roi* should be understood as a form of ritual performance. This essay will respond to Tiffany's suggestion and examine this event through the anthropology of ritual proposed in *Les Rites de Passage* (1916) by the contemporary and associate of Jarry, Charles-Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) and the later developments of this discourse by Scottish anthropologist, Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (1969). This essay focuses specifically on the liminal, a symbolic and fundamental stage within the apparatus of ritual.

The term liminal is derived from the Latin limen, meaning threshold and foregrounds some kind of departure or crossing over boundaries. The liminal is understood as a powerful state existing outside and beyond normative structures and thus interpreted as both sacred and profane. (4) Normative conventions defined through the practices of society's behaviours or 'norms' — the shared values or institutions regarded as constitutive of the social structure. These values of socialization operate by encouraging or enforcing social activity and outcomes that ought, while discouraging or preventing social activity that should not occur. 'Norms' thus promote social activity that is valued within the social structure. It is by way of a disturbance through specific activities and performative gestures that the 'threshold' state of the symbolic ritual world is invoked and encountered. In a retroactive reading of the avant-garde this essay considers the première of *Ubu Roi* as representing a similar symbolic disruption to normative social structure that occurs during the liminal stage of ritual.

The social and political agenda of the artistic gestures and activities associated with the avant-garde to disrupt the normative social structure of the Ancien Régime is evidenced in William's account of the etymology of the term avant-garde. In The Politics of the Avant-Garde (1989), Williams explains the art-historical use of the term that derives from a military term referring to the most advanced party of a fighting body, (the vanguard). The avant-garde had been used metaphorically within political and social thought in the mid-nineteenth century and shortly

after the term was applied to describe self-forming artistic or intellectual groups that sought to challenge the social order. Their aim to motivate confrontation with the cultural establishment is evidenced in William's description of the movement as "militants of a creativity which would revive and liberate humanity". (5) Williams, *The Politics of the Avant-Garde*, p. 242

However, although the task of the avant-garde was to mobilise radical social change, William's maintains that this project merely operated within "a culturally transformed but otherwise persistent and recuperated old order". (6) Williams, Raymond, *The Politics of the Avant-Garde*, in Post-Impressionism to World War II, Debbie Lewer (ed.), UK: Blackwell, 1989, p. 251. What is understood as the crucial feature of Williams' argument is his observation of the avant-garde as emerging from the very structure that it opposed—the bourgeoisie. This is articulated in his description of the avant-garde as "distinctly bourgeois dissidents." (7) Williams, *The Politics of the Avant-Garde*, p. 247.

A similar position is maintained and outlined by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974; trans.1984). Bürger claims that while avant-gardes of the early twentieth century — Dada, Surrealism, and Constructivism were engaged in motivated critiques of the institution of art, the subsequent post-war iterations of the avant-garde through self-reflexive repetition provided little or no critique but conversely institutionalised it's own legacy within the cultural establishment. Bürger furthers his position in relation to the failures of the historical and neo-avant-garde by arguing their inability to overcome the distinction between art and life.

However Tiffany's account of *Ubu Roi*, problematises Bürger's argument regarding his claims of the avant-garde's failure to unite art and life. *Ubu Roi*, in many counts exemplifies a reciprocal and entwined relationship between the modalities. Firstly in the conception of the play, where the proximity to the everyday is evidenced by it being based on a series of tales that had been handed down orally and in written form from one generation of *potaches* (schoolboy pranksters) to the next, pillorying a physics teacher, M. Félix Hérbert, at the Lycée de Rennes. In the realisation of the play which Jarry undertook having completed his studies by convincing his peers to transform a mock-epic schoolboy tale into a theatrical production. This distinction becomes less clear in the realisation of the play. On reading Tiffany's account of the première the paradigms of art and life become further entwined.

From Tiffany's account, the purpose of the play was not to chronicle the fate of M. Ubu, or any other story for that matter, but was instead to operate as a springboard for provocation. The response from the audience can therefore be understood as fundamental if not paramount to how

Ubu Roi is realized (in a conceptual and performative capacity). This is evidenced in Georges Rémond's, retrospective report of the event in *Le Mercure* in 1955 that reveals the fact that Jarry planned and initiated the demonstrations. The climax was, thus, not the revelation of the plot (that the dead king's son was restored to the throne) but rather that "the play be halted and that the theatre explode". (8) Tiffany, *Jarry's Inner Circle and the Public Debut of Père Ubu*, p. 147. Jarry's cohorts, Jean de Tinan and Rachilde, planted in the audience incited the fracas by clapping and hissing at the same time. Some of Jarry's associates fired projectiles onto the members of the orchestra and shouted insults at the actors, while another turned the house lights on to reveal this "unscheduled performance on the seats". (9) Tiffany, *Jarry's Inner Circle and the Public Debut of Père Ubu*, p. 147. The bizarre, seemingly foolish exploits presented by *Ubu Roi* disrupted the traditional form of theatre and provoked a reaction that departed radically from the traditional reception of theatre by a bourgeoisie audience. This desire for provocation by Jarry's is articulated by his claim that *Ubu Roi* would "confront the public like the exaggerating mirror". (10) Tiffany, *Jarry's Inner Circle and the Public Debut of Père Ubu*, p. 153.

This amalgam of art and life is further articulated by the actor M. Gémier, who played the protagonist M. Ubu, in his description of the première as a "Carnival of chaos" (11) Tiffany, *Jarry's Inner Circle and the Public Debut of Père Ubu*, p. 146 and p. 83. It is noteworthy that the carnival can also be interpreted as a form of ritual. The demonstrations on stage and more pertinently, within the audience that are outlined by Tiffany, can be understood in the manner of van Gennep and Turner's interpretation of the liminal stage of ritual as a momentary disruption to normal conducts of social behavior.

The strategies of staging to engender the bedlam both on and off the stage on the première of *Ubu Roi* can be aligned with strategies used within ritual. As van Gennep and Turner proposes, it is through a suspension regular conventions enacted through symbolic ritual strategies that the liminal is engendered. The indignant reception on the night of the première of *Ubu Roi*, attended by the more exclusive strata of bourgeois society, exemplifies a cultural paradigm not necessarily associated with ritual theory where the concept of liminality by way of anti-structure through a suspension of social conventions might apply. (12) Turner used van Gennep's tripartite structure of liminality, in his analysis of fieldwork undertaken whilst living with the Ndembu tribe of North Western Zambia. In his development of van Gennep's concept of liminality, Turner proposed the concept of 'anti-structure'. Anti-structure provides a useful conceptual tool to reconsider other cultural paradigms where normative social values no longer apply. By introducing the term 'structure' to articulate the values and the normative mode of social interaction and the term 'societas' to

describe an interpretation of a standard form of community, Turner identified 'antistructure' and 'communitas' as their respective counterparts. Anti-structure is demonstrated in the portrayal of the hero M. Ubu, depicted as a buffoon both in appearance and character. M. Ubu purposefully portrayed as a character corrupted by wealth, power and greed, betrays and murders the king of Poland to seize power. The actor Firmin Gémier, wearing an oversized prosthetic stomach portrayed a gluttonous hero whose enormous appetite for food befitted his powerful position in society.

The strategies used in the production of the play further complicates Bürger's argument in relation to the failure of the avant-garde to realign the paradigms of art and life. In its cultural/historical context the unconventional improvised aesthetic of Ubu Roi may have been interpreted by a nineteenth century bourgeoisie audience as being closer to carnival than to theatre. In his opening speech on the night of the première Jarry discloses the impromptu preparations: "You must expect to see important personages like M. Ubu and the Czar forced to gallop neck-and neck on cardboard horses that we've spent the night painting in order to supply the action." Jarry's long-winded speech provides little background to the story of M. Ubu and might be more accurately described as Jarry's public demonstration of both ambivalence and irreverence toward the expectations and values of the cultural establishment and to a greater extent, the bourgeois audience. Rather than an orchestra, Jarry provided "carnival music", and explained, "As to our orchestra that isn't here, we'll miss only its brilliance and tone", assigning instead, "various brasses, gongs and speaking-trumpet horns that we haven't had time to collect" as substitute. Following Jarry's speech the curtain opened with the riotous shout "Merde!" issued from the protagonist M. Ubu heralding the fracas that would ensue. (13) Tiffany, *Jarry's Inner Circle and the Public Debut of Père Ubu*, p. 145

It is unclear whether the play was even allowed to continue on the night of the première. The actor Gémier, playing M. Ubu, maintains that by the third act, the prison scene where an actor's bent arm represented the prison door and the sound 'creak, crack' emitting from Gémier to represent the door's opening, the audience had had enough. "At that moment the public, finding, no doubt, that the foolishness had lasted long enough, set to screaming and storming". (14) Tiffany, *Jarry's Inner Circle and the Public Debut of Père Ubu*, p. 145 Tiffany quotes Jarry as stating that once the curtain went up "Ubu's speeches were not meant to be full of witticisms ...but of stupid remarks, uttered with the authority of the Ape". (15) Tiffany, *Jarry's Inner Circle and the Public Debut of Père Ubu*, p. 153

It is clear from the accounts that the orchestrated riot in the audience was ultimately the premise for the play. Although Williams maintains the avant-garde as operating at a remove from everyday life — Tiffany's

account of the première of *Ubu Roi* provides an example the avant-garde as integrally informed by and informant of life.

In an introductory note to the transcript of the play, the editor maintains that it was "the catastrophe [that] made it famous". (12) Jarry, *Ubu Roi*, p. 2 The use of the term catastrophe seems apposite; a catastrophe implies a disaster occurring out of the ordinary that provokes a violent seismic change. This association of disruption with a productive force of transformation bears a striking similarity to concepts outlined in ritual theory proposed by van Gennep.

Van Gennep argues in *Les Rites de Passage* that in both modern and pre-modern societies forms of ceremonial rites mark significant transitions to the social status of individuals. These rites demonstrate and authenticate changes in an individual's status, marking significant moments within the course of life, such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. Van Gennep proposed that embedded within the structure of the ritual is a systemic pattern that enacts and enables these rites of transition. He identified the structure of the ritual as constituted by a tripartite movement that occurs over three stages: separation, segregation, and integration. This movement pivots around a particular moment that is made manifest in the ritual and van Gennep identified this as liminal. Van Gennep proposed the liminal as marking a crucial stage within the operations of the ritual. The importance of liminality wihin the framework of the ritual is evidenced by his prioritization of this stage in describing the accompanying entry and conclusive stages as pre-liminal and postliminal.

In order to initiate the liminal stage as an experiential state it is necessary that the participant be symbolically (and in most cases psychologically and/or physically) removed from the space of the everyday. The preliminal describes the first stage of the ritual process, determined by separation from everyday activities. Through ritual, this separation from the everyday enables an encounter with the threshold state of the symbolic ritual world. It is within the liminal stage of the ritual that symbolic transformation of the individual is understood to take place. The liminal is considered as a powerful state existing outside and beyond normative structures and is thus interpreted as both sacred and profane. The final, postliminal stage prepares the initiated individual to reintegrate back into the social order. (For example, the male child having undergone specific rites of passage is symbolically transformed and reintegrates into society as an adult male.)

The significance of the liminal stage in relation to this reinterpretation of *Ubu Roi* is the understanding of the transformative potential that is implicated by these moments of rupture and disturbance of regular conventions. It is understood that during the liminal stage of

ritual the transformative potential becomes realized and affective. It is interesting to consider avant-garde practices, exemplified on the night of the première of *Ubu Roi*, under these conditions to reconsider the transformative potential within this moment that can be interpretated as initiating the formation of contestatory spaces.

For Tiffany, this space of contestation mobilized by Jarry and his cohorts, is not merely as a juvenile form of entertainment but also, in relation to Turner's concept of the ritual, as a collaborative, self-initiated attempt by his generation to craft their own rites of passage through their explicit enactment of anti-structure within the space of the theatre. Tiffany's conjecture can be developed further in an interpretation of Jarry and his cohorts who worked collectively as part of the Théâtre des Phynances in Rennes and those involved in the Symbolist avant-garde in Paris as communitas.

Turner's term communitas operates in opposition to societas, the term Turner coined to describe an interpretation of a standard form of community. Turner used this term to describe the group of individuals undergoing the initiation rites who are literally 'stripped' of the vestiges that symbolically represent their position within societas. Turner recognised that without physical trappings and through their collective display of an abandonment of status the participants unite to form communitas, a non-hierarchical social group. Turner expanded the term communitas from participants undergoing ritual initiation in a tribal context to his own contemporary context identifying specific social groups such as the counter culture movements that emerged during the late 1960' as examples of non-hierarchical social groups that displayed a similar collective abandonment of status.

It is proposed that van Gennep may have also been informed by his own contemporaries in the figuration of his anthropological theories. This conjecture is relayed in Tiffany's account of *Ubu Roi*. Tiffany reveals that the French Symbolist publishing house Le Mercure, who originally published the script of *Ubu Roi* also published Van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage*, The editor of Le Mercure supported Jarry, who was then only twenty three years old. This publishing house one of the few stable avant-garde publications of that period provided a significant meeting point for the French avant-garde. Tiffany maintains that van Gennep's understanding of the ritual as a cultural and symbolic apparatus that mobilized alternate spaces to realise new potentialities, was more likely informed by the immediate cultural context of his peers — Jarry and the artists and intellectuals who gathered in the offices of Le Mercure — rather than the groups that formed the object of his anthropological studies, such as the Slavs, the Lapps, the Luiseno Indians and the Cheremis of Vyatka that feature in *Les Rites de Passage*. Although

Tiffany's argument that van Gennep's discoveries were speculative and not based on original fieldwork (16) Rosemary Zumwalt's account, *Arnold van Gennep: The Hermit of Bourgla Reine*, 1982 that describes the methodology for his dissertation for École des Hautes Études, published in 1904 under the title *Tabou Ettotémisme* à Madagascar, and his later publication, *Mythes et Légendes d'Australie*, (1906), as embedded in fieldwork. She quotes van Gennep, "I counted on doing as one does when studying the Masai or the Australians, the Eskimos or the Indians: going into the villages themselves, staying there for some time and so conducting complete inquiries step by step" p.2 may be misguided, his assertion that Jarry and his cohorts had direct influence on van Gennep while carrying out his research for *Les Rites de Passage* may not be unfounded. This proximity to the Avant-Garde may have provided van Gennep with the opportunity to consider these more immediate (though nonetheless foreign and unusual) activities and performative gestures as modern forms of ceremonial rites in their creation of a space beyond the realm of the bourgeois quotidian.

The tension with regard to the bourgeois is articulated in Williams' interpretation of the avant-garde in his claim regarding the avant-garde as reliant on the very structure that it opposed. This argument is further reinforced by the fact that many avant-garde practices were later constituted to uphold the existing hierarchical cultural apparatus (as evidenced in advertising strategies associated with marketing). Ritual theory is helpful to unpack this tension, as there is a similar underlying and nuanced tension between structure and anti-structure within the symbolic form of the ritual. Although the liminal stage is interpreted as an expression of 'anti-structure' — considered antithetical to structure within the ritual, both van Gennep and Turner argue that, through enabling necessary transformation to occur, it is in fact the source of structure. To provide an example, Turner examines the rituals of the Ndembu in Zambia which are carried out to ensure a symbolic transformation, for example the performances of the girl's puberty rites (Nkang'a) which enables her symbolic transformation and reintegration into the social group and so maintains the continuation of the ongoing social structure within the village. In a similar vein, Williams interprets the avant-garde as possessing a symbiotic relationship with the social structure, a necessary contestation to maintain the cultural status quo.

However, it is important not to overlook that in ritual theory both individual and collective development becomes engendered within the liminal stage. In a similar capacity it can be argued that within these spaces of rupture cultural developments become engendered. Although, Williams and Bürger argue that the avant-garde did not institute immediate radical social change, it is clear that Jarry's provocative activities extended well beyond his lifetime influencing later critical

Azimuth, 2009, Wood, wax, fabric 5.7 metres × 2 metres IMMA Collection (photographed by sean & yvette photography)

artistic activities that played a role in transforming the cultural and arguably the social realm. These include canonical moments, such as the events at the Cabaret Voltaire that were directly informed by the première. The performances staged in this nightclub used similar confrontational strategies (17) The artists and performers developed innovative forms of performance using a chaotic methodology, such as simultaneous poetry. This bizarre announcement of the poem, often read in different languages, with different rhythms, tonalities, and by different persons at the same time, undermined and disrupted traditional modes of address in theatre to those first enacted by Jarry for artistic and political purposes. Dada used Jarry's methods to implicate the audience using direct forms of address, provoking direct critical response to the socio-political situation. Marcel Janco, one of the founding members of Dada's *Cabaret Voltaire*, (18) *Cabaret Voltaire* was founded by Hugo Ball, with his companion Emmy Hennings on February 5, 1916 as a cabaret for artistic and political purposes. Other founding members were Marcel Janco, Richard Huelsenbeck, Tristan Tzara and Jean Arp. Events at the cabaret proved pivotal in the founding of the anarchic art movement known as Dada claims that the group lost confidence in their culture and thus everything had to be demolished — "public opinion, education, institutions, museums, good taste, in short, the whole prevailing order". (19) Hofmann, *Documents of Dada and Surrealism: Dada and Surrealist Journals in the Mary Reynolds Collection*, p. 3 The attempts by artists associated with Dada to achieve this by shocking 'common sense', bear a resemblance to activities that inscribe an anti-structure outlined by Turner as we have seen. The radical gestures that disrupted the traditional models of artistic and practice prompted by Jarry, developed through Dada, Artaudian Theatre and later counter-cultural movements within artistic practice throughout the late 1960s have been repeatedly re-inscribed to transform the very idea of artistic practice.

This repeated transformation of forms and interpretations of artistic practice is acknowledged within Williams' own conclusion to *The Politics of the Avant- Garde*. In the same sentiment as Foster, Williams proposes that there is still much to be learned from the avant-garde. Both early and later iterations of the avant-garde have transformed and expanded our understanding of contemporary art to include numerous activities previously beyond the scope of conception in this field. What can now be recognised is that significant forms of these practices are not necessarily the objects that were created by the artists associated with this movement, but rather, the more provocative and direct forms of presentation that became engendered by collective spaces of contestatory articulation.

Rather than focusing on the failure of the avant-garde it might prove more productive in our current contemporary situation to reflect on how

these canonical avant-garde moments, such as Jarry's première of Ubu Roi provide instances where alternate forms of collective contestatory spaces may be formed. By reconsidering the avant-garde through the rubric of ritual, the understanding of the capacity of art to mobilize spaces that resist bourgeois value systems (based on economy or power) and form a shared sense of collectivity is opened up.

The anthropological interpretation of ritual outlined by van Gennep and Turner, offers the paradigm through which a reconsideration of the cultural paradigm of the historical avant-garde may be reinserted, albeit retroactively, into the socio-political realm. By theoretically maintaining access to the critical space of the avant-garde the project cannot be interpreted as one of failure but rather one that raises the question of the capacity of art to generate spaces of possibilities •

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A banner with the symbol of the comet was created for the three day event Radical Love, conceived by Sam Keogh and Joeseph Noonan Ganley, August 2010 (Image: Cormac Browne)

The Approach, 2009, Fabric banner
2.7 metres × 1.7 metres, IMMA Collection
(photograpy: sean & yvette photography)