

Liturgy for a New Secular World

“I wanted to create a moment, in which people could feel something profound, perhaps even their own spirit or the spirit of the drum and gourd.”

Dana Claxton

Ablakela is a new performance work produced in October 1999 by Dana Claxton as part of the performance festival Live at the End of the Century. Ablakela, the word meaning ‘calm’ in the Lakota language, employed a video projection of the artist wrapping grass while accompanied by two peyote singers of the Native American Church.

The simple images of live singers and a single live screen of the artist’s hands dividing beargrass were mesmerizing and effective. The songs and sounds of the water drum and rattle were a live element performed by renowned Peyote Singers Verdell Primeaux and Johnny Mike. Together they produce music employed in both religious and social contexts. The Native American Church preserves Native American ritual in the United States and has had a history of persecution similar to the banning of the Potlatch in British Columbia. Because of the ritual use of the peyote cactus many practitioners were jailed and fined for participation. Only recently this church was granted protection under the American constitutional Freedom of Religion Amendment and it is still an ongoing struggle.

The music is beautiful and solemn, reminiscent of religious music in other cultures. The sound is entirely original and ancient at once. For the first twenty minutes they accompanied themselves with the rattle and waterdrum, the latter drones each note out, the voices soaring above the percussion. For the second half they sang unaccompanied, the sound of their voices lifting through the ballroom. The grass is divided up as if to be braided and the artist used beargrass that is similar to the braiding of sweetgrass, used in many native communities across North America. Sweetgrass has religious and medicinal purposes and is considered sacred. The act of the artist’s hands manipulating the grasses for forty minutes adds a meditative element to the work and becomes an environment that speaks to healing and renewal.

Claxton has often employed visual symbols and metaphor in her work to focus on colonialist double standards and destruction of First Peoples, customs and environment. Her production in film and video establishes her as an important voice in contemporary media production. Her video, film and installation works have largely overshadowed Claxton’s work in performance art but it is a medium she has returned to again and again.

1992’s Tree of Consumption (grunt 1992) focused on environmental issues and Claxton read texts as she wore a long flowing tree dress with five TV monitors. The video images were stark and chilling. Environmental destruction loomed large as a theme. For the performance Buffalo Bone China (Tribe and AKA1998) Claxton smashed fine bone china for 50 minutes highlighting the use of buffalo bones in colonial porcelain production. The

production highlighted colonialist attitudes towards resources that have destroyed First Nation's economies.

These earlier works often focused on symbols of threat; Ablakela attempts a more spiritual end. And while earlier work focused on the past and present, Ablakela projects itself onto the future. What she does retain from previous work is the single image performance. Each work brings forth one image strongly and fully. Her rooted stance in *Tree of Consumption* and her goggled figure smashing china with a mallet in *Buffalo Bone China* remain strong images retained by anyone who saw the work. Ablakela images echo the title yet retain the strong simplicity of the earlier work. The meditative music and simple image of a single pair of hands dividing rushes evoke many metaphors, both modern and archetypal.

Performance art is a medium that has been exceptionally malleable and Claxton uses it here to create a modern ritual. Performance art has always been made up of four essential elements: the Action, the Spectacle, the Ritual and the Personal. These are held together by a strong and divergent history throughout the 20th Century. Performance differs from more traditional art forms as it is held together solely by this history rather than a set of practices or techniques. In Ablakela, Claxton reconfigures the Western performance art medium within First Nation's spiritual practice, blending traditional actions and music in a new ritual that speaks to healing.

Ritual has had a strong place in performance, beginning with Antonin Artaud's experiments with Theatre of Cruelty. Inspired by Balinese theatre, Artaud attempted to bring ritual back into the theatre, to create a place for the ancient within the modern. Artaud's discoveries fell on deaf ears within the theatre but were picked up by performance artists again and again. Hermann Nitsch's performances included slaughtered animals, blood, and naked bodies in an attempt to get back to a place of the soul where ancient and modern could merge into one practice. Yet Claxton's use of ritual is nothing like the writings and images of Artaud and Nitsch. Her work has no sign of their Dionysian frenzy and her images and music live up to their title. Against the simplicity of Ablakela's representations the writings of Artaud and the performances of Nitsch are surprisingly Catholic in their imagery; all crucifixion and blood sacrifice.

The communion Ablakela offers is an interesting contrast to the cannibalistic communion of Christianity's wine and bread. There is an account of Cree Chief Piapot of Saskatchewan, who when threatened with one missionary's visions of hell replied, "You talk like a child and you cannot scare me. Nobody will find the Great Spirit through fear. That is not his plan." Ablakela echoes these sentiments; its elements play into ancient strategies to evoke the spirit. Sound, movement, and image come together in time and space to create a place where the spirit can enter. This is an old story. Performance art's role in this work is simply one of context.

Artaud also went to Mexico to study peyote ritual and published his observations in one of his last books, *The Peyote Dance*. He traveled days on horseback to the Tarahumara

Nation arriving on the day of the death of a village man just in time for the peyote ritual. In many ways Artaud never survived that ritual. On his return to France he was soon committed to an asylum where he spent much of the rest of his life but his time with the Tarahumaras became an experience he wrote about again and again. Artaud's struggle was one of the great existential searches of the 20th Century and his appearance in the writings of Sontag, Foucault, Derrida and others attests to his central importance in Western Philosophy. His attempt was to reanimate the spirit within modern life and this attempt failed though he dreamed a more utopian modernism than was ever achieved.

Claxton's Ablakela is a salve for all of Artaud's frenzy. In it she reanimates ritual into modern life. In it she soothes the soul of a hundred years of Modernism. Her elements are ancient yet current. Primeaux and Mike represent the many First Nations spiritual practices that have survived the heavy hand of colonialism. In the longhouses and sweat lodges where First Nations spiritual practice continues to exist despite legislation that has continually fought for its extinction.

Artaud's account of the Tarahumaras in *The Peyote Dance* is an interesting counterpart to other anthropological texts. Part anthropology and part psychology he weaves the elements together, truth with madness. But the experience with the Tarahumaras and peyote was an important one for Artaud. Central in his writing is his strong distaste for western culture and attitudes and this colours everything he sees. He records his discussion with the governor of the province who had banned the festival and bulldozed the peyote fields but there is no indication if his intervention is to any effect. In a later chapter he relates the Tarahumara to the Atlanteans through Plato and it begins to sound like too many old arguments from the ancient Phoenicians to Kennituck Man that attempt to unite the new and old worlds. The terms New and Old World alone suggest their own bias but this bias appears again and again in anthropology, especially when related to First Nations and their culture.

But Artaud falls into the same traps. His view of Tupahumara as pure, and the westerner as contaminated, is a concept that is repeated in anthropology again and again. The fetishization of First Nations traditions and objects that are "pre-contact" or "traditional" continues to this day, as if once the Indians came into contact with whites they were somehow contaminated with Western culture. Central to this is the belief that these cultures were weak or fragile and on the verge of disappearing. Photographers and painters who chronicled these "disappearing" cultures reinforced this and much early North American art history documents this assumption. Nowhere in this account is the realization these cultures were adaptive and strong and reconfigured themselves to the reality of Europeans and their culture.

But Claxton's Ablakela delivers just such a message. Peyote use and ritual among the American Indians came over the Rio Grande in the 19th Century and the music is an adaptation of traditional music from many sources, including Gregorian chant. In Ablakela it transforms again into a ritual that is secular and has no relation to the religious rites of the Native American Church. She is careful to use beargrass and not

sweetgrass because the latter has too many religious connotations. She is intent on creating a space where everyone can participate rather than simply observe. By reconfiguring it within performance art she allows for the inclusion of both First Nations and other cultures.

Ablakela appearance in the festival Live at the End of the Century in late 1999 is an ironic context for the work. After twenty centuries of Christianity the last 100 years represents a secularization of public life that is unprecedented in European history. We are in the beginning of an electronic revolution that threatens us with the largest change in living standards and conditions since the Industrial Revolution. The turnover to the year 2000 sent thousands of people across the world stockpiling food and water in a modern rendition of a doomsday scenario. Claxton's call for calm has to be seen against these contexts as well.

And it is secularization that Ablakela addresses so well. Beginning with Fredrick Nietzsche who declared God 'dead' much of western culture echoes his pronouncement. Artaud's last work was a radio play entitled "Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu" (roughly To have done with the judgement of God) was banned before broadcast by the Catholic Church just four months before he died. In killing the Christian god western culture had lost its last link to the sacred. Suddenly there was no way in. European existentialism over the past 150 years documents this crisis. In The Peyote Dance Artaud recognizes that the Tupahumara can still call up the godhead, be in touch with the spirits in a way that western man has lost. Much of the European fascination with First Nation's culture, both current and historical, is centred on this realization.

In Ablakela there was a sharing that was evidenced during the forty minutes. The audience's fidgeting from a late start faded away as the music and images lulled us into a quiet meditation. Within ten minutes the people sitting up on chairs looking had sat back to feel the music and let the images wash over them. Ablakela wasn't constructed as much to be seen as to be experienced, its effect being neither the images nor music but the coming together with audience in the space they created. The calmness of the title was echoed on people's faces as they dispersed the building.

If Claxton is trying to evoke the spirits it is an old preoccupation. Catharsis in the year 2000 is not a word that gets used much anymore. Coined by Aristotle, it described the effect of Greek tragedy; how the audience came together to watch a story of a doomed man fighting against his fate and became one watching this spectacle and were cleansed through this process. It is a remnant of religious services that theatre took with it when it broke from earlier ritual in Greece twenty five hundred years ago. In the 20th Century many theatre practitioners have doubted tragedy's ability to work on modern audiences. Artaud himself said in an essay that Oedipus was fine for the Greeks two thousand years ago but is no good to us. It was up to each generation to create its own masterpieces. His prescription was to bombard the audience into catharsis; his Theatre of Cruelty was brazen and assaultive. Completely shocking to 1930s Paris it has become a formula that today takes in everything from MTV to WWF, all spectacle and delirium.

Claxton takes a different approach where western histories of catharsis aren't much involved. Unlike Artaud, who went through theatre for his cleansing, her healing ritual is rooted in First Nation's Spiritual belief, in which the crisis of the Christian God hasn't much effect. Her reconfiguring of the ritual with Performance Art secularizes it but also bypasses the voyeuristic western fascination with First Nations spiritual practice.

The image of the basket appears at the very end of the performance. A small Innu basket stands in for all of the First Nations craft that has survived colonialism's destruction. Across North America these skills continue to be passed on generation to generation and adapted to remain current within the lives First Nations now live. This performance was a celebration of survival of these cultures and recognition of their continuing vitality. Ablakela explores notions of ritual, performance art and First Nations traditions in new and contemporary ways. It evokes ancient and important connections to the earth and to humanity. It is both a meditation and mediation, sending liturgical messages evoking hope and renewal. Ablakela is contemporary in the most profound sense. It is a response to a secularized world we all now inhabit.

Glenn Alteen

April 2000

Bibliography

The Peyote Dance by Antonin Artaud

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The Noonday Press, New York (1976)

The Oedipus reference is from Artaud's The Theatre and its Double, an essay titled No More Masterpieces

The Chief Piapot quote is taken from Tatanga Mani Walking Buffalo of the Stonies by Grant MacEwan, published M.G. Hurtig Ltd., Edmonton (1969)