

Art and Audience in Pacho O'Donnell's *Vincent y los cuervos*

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One of the many objectives of dramatists, directors, and actors has long been the dynamic involvement of the audience in the actions and emotions of the theatrical work.¹ At times experimental theatre accomplishes this in what can be a startling, aggressive, and sometimes hostile manner, which frequently succeeds only in alienating the audience even more. In these situations, the spectator, sometimes harassed, usually awkward, can be forced "into" the play, but not always happily. Fortunately (for this critic at any rate), theatre has moved beyond this belligerence and learned to assimilate the audience less painfully, as was demonstrated in the 1984 Argentine production of Pacho O'Donnell's *Vincent y los cuervos*.²

Published as part of Pacho O'Donnell, *Teatro* (Buenos Aires: Galeana, 1982), *Vincent y los cuervos* was produced in 1984 by El Teatro del Bosque of La Plata and performed in both La Plata and Buenos Aires (Teatros de San Telmo). At the core of the play is an artistic rendition (re-creation in the broadest sense of the word) of the life of Dutch painter, Vincent Van Gogh, coupled with Antonin Artaud's comments on (and thus his re-creation of) that life. In this respect the difference between art and life is obscured as the play converts life into art and vice versa. Although many of the staging techniques have been used before, their combination here was particularly effective and resulted in a refreshing and original product. The format for the staging also seemed especially appropriate for the text in spite of the fact that, according to one of the production executives, O'Donnell wrote the play and first staged it "para escenario a la italiana, y de criterio totalmente naturalista."³ Thus, like the written text, the performance itself was predicated on the concept of difference in that it endeavored to be different from the written text and from prior performances (of this work and others). At the same time, by actively involving the audience in the play and blurring the perceived lines between art and life, it attempted to eliminate the difference inherent to and perhaps underlined by all art forms—that between art and "reality"/life. Nev-



Vincent y los cuervos, Teatro del Bosque. Buenos Aires, 1984. Courtesy: Ernesto Aschieri, fotografías.

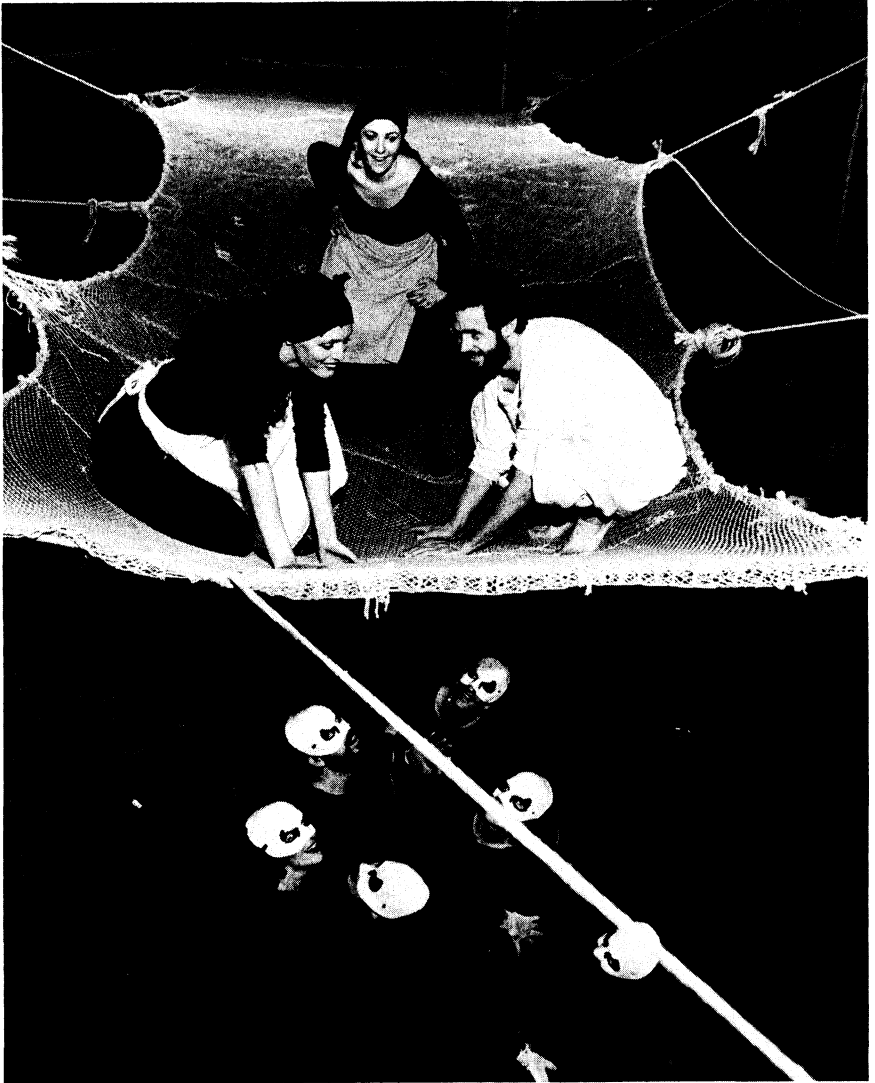
ertheless, the play's main concerns (highlighted by this production) are unequivocally art in general and theatre in particular as they reflect this "play" of differences.

Vincent y los cuervos eliminated this division between art and life in several ways. First, the audience was not allowed to be seated in the theatre until the play had begun. Thus, one entered *in medias res* just as one embarks on life. Although this was certainly not the first time activity on stage has begun before the official "beginning" of a play (e.g., the Broadway production of *Vanities* and the 1984 Mexico City production of *Te juro Juana que tengo ganas*, among many others), *Vincent* differed somewhat in its approach, for none of the audience was allowed to enter until the actors were already in place and in action, whereas in the above cited examples the actors appeared after some of the audience was already seated. Furthermore, the auditorium itself was darkened in the Teatro del Bosque production, and one entered a dim, shadowy theatre already filled with activity which started without the spectator and presumably would continue after (s)he was gone. In this manner the production eliminated that traditional wait in the well-lit auditorium for the moment when the lights would dim, the actors would enter, and the play (fantasy, not-life) would begin. As one's eyes adjusted to the darkness, one heard strange sounds, and other senses became more acute: there were unique smells, and other people (significantly, both spectators and actors) were perceived nearby. Although these sensations produced an air of mystery,

strangeness, as well as a bit of intimidation, the normally sharp disparity between art and reality was softened and blurred or, at the very least, that separation was moved back to the theatre door and was behind us rather than in front of us as we watched the play.

This sense of being in the center of things, a part of the action, was highlighted by the absence of the customary stage. Neither of the two theatres was traditionally shaped, with the stage at one end. Although the Buenos Aires auditorium itself was rectangular, the spectator sat in a pit in the center and was surrounded on all four sides by a stage which was several feet higher. Hanging precariously low overhead was a net which also functioned as a "stage" for some of the action,⁴ and one sat not in a conventional seat but on a large, cushioned paint can which, while never providing comfort, nevertheless did facilitate circular mobility as one rotated to follow the action on all four sides as well as overhead.⁵ According to Sago, this design was the result of several years of investigation on the theme of audience participation, and Quico García's idea here was inspired by the game of football where the spectator "vive siempre desde el mismo lugar, pero intensamente las instancias del partido, sentándose, parándose, girando siempre buscando la acción" (personal correspondence). The setting in La Plata was similar except that the auditorium was uniquely triangular in shape, and the stage, which surrounded us on all sides, was composed of a variety of platforms, some higher than we, some at our level. At the same time part of the audience sat in bleachers, which rose up to the highest stage level, with their backs to that section of the stage, so that we looked at them as we watched the action there.

This sensation of involvement was emphasized in two more ways as the disparity among actors, characters, and audience dissolved. First, not only were the characters at our level at times, but they also moved among us: Artaud, the *cuervos*, even Vincent himself came off the "stage," into the audience, and mingled while they continued in their roles. Indeed, one of the most moving moments of the play occurred when Van Gogh left the "stage" and stood among the audience as he delivered a very dramatic and emotional speech. The actor's proximity to the public, which allowed us to see the slightest facial expression and tensing of muscles, demanded an especially high quality performance on the part of the actor and gave the audience the impression that this was life (or "reality") and that we were a part of it. In another performance technique which also required special acting skills, some of the conversations between characters took place over our heads, around, or through us. Traditionally, when two characters address each other, they do so on stage at a relatively short distance from each other, but in *Vincent* the characters conversed from one end of the auditorium to the other, with the audience between them. We twisted to see or hear them both (not unlike what we must often do in the outside world), and at moments we wondered if the words were not patently intended for us rather than the apparent interlocutor.⁶ At the same time, we were continually called upon to shift and turn our attention from one end of the auditorium to the other. As in life, we never knew where the next dramatic scene was to be found, and, as a scene began, we heard voices first and then turned to find the action. Obviously, a dialogue which takes places over, around, and through the spectator directly negates



Vincent y los cuervos, Teatro del Bosque. Buenos Aires, 1984. Courtesy: Ernesto Aschieri, fotografías.

the traditional difference between art and life as it makes the spectator a part of that art.

Furthermore, the acoustical effects themselves tended to involve us directly in the play since we were surrounded by voices and sounds. The buzzing of the *cuervos* came from all sides. Although the notion of the *cuervos* is taken from a work of art, a painting by Van Gogh, and thus they are a reproduction of a reproduction, a metaphor of a metaphor, as the play progressed we slowly recognized that they function as a metaphor for society

which, like any bird of prey, pursues and oppresses by its pecking, buzzing, gossip, murmurs, whispers, and insistence on conformity. In this respect, the auditory sensations forced us to identify with the main character, Van Gogh, who (according to the play) was persecuted, driven insane, and eventually induced to commit suicide by this ever present, coercive, bourgeois society which insists that individuality must be eliminated, that art is merely decoration reproducing static, pointless moments or scenes, and that only conformity and a market-place mentality may thrive. Thus, our position was that of Van Gogh, surrounded by, engulfed by, and unable to escape from the drone of society. But at the same time there is a paradox, for as the action of the play progressed, the *cuervos* moved among the audience, whispering into our ears repetitions of those words heard on stage: “¡Es un fracasado!” “No vende, nunca vendió ni una sola de sus obras,” “¿Escucharon? ¡No quiere dejar de ser el mismo!” (129-30, Galeana edition). Thus, in spite of our identification with Van Gogh, the play demonstrated (and we accepted) that we are, nonetheless, a part of that same society which drove him mad and which would negate the very premises of his art and this play. As a result, our identification was bidirectional, and our role within the play is redoubled, for we perceived ourselves as the *cuervos* and Van Gogh, the destroyer and the destroyed. The production suggested, as Russian literature long has, that perhaps what we tend to perceive as antithetical qualities (i.e., destroyer and destroyed) may indeed coexist within the same entity. Along the same vein, the performance undermined our perception of difference and highlighted recent philosophical theories that our perception of difference is social convention, based on the minuscule and irrelevant, and created by society to maintain artificial hierarchies.⁷

The production further highlighted that Van Gogh's entire life might be defined as the problematic result of our philosophy of difference, while it unequivocally illustrated that art is life and life is art, i.e., emphasized the similarity rather than the difference between the two. On the most basic level the play is an artistic production about an artist—thus art times two, as it were. Art is Van Gogh's life as he slowly but inevitably becomes alienated from what we would call “life” and, metaphorically at the very least, “lives” in his art. Significantly, too, the play also incorporated somewhat lengthy speeches from Antonin Artaud's “Van Gogh, el suicidado por la sociedad,” which again is art about art. And, Artaud himself was one of the main characters of the play, functioning as something of a narrator, guide, through the play as well as providing comments on art and the artist's position within society: “¡como si no fuésemos todos, igual que el pobre van Gogh, unos suicidados de la sociedad!” (208); “Creo que Gauguin era de opinión que el artista debe buscar el símbolo, el mito, agrandar las cosas de la vida hasta el mito, mientras que van Gogh pensaba que hay que saber deducir el mito de las cosas más pedestres de la vida. Por mi parte pienso que estaba jodidamente en lo cierto. Pues la realidad es terriblemente superior a cualquier historia, a cualquier fábula, a cualquier divinidad, a cualquier superrealidad” (194).⁸ Thus, Van Gogh's art is his life as was Artaud's, and both here are artistic renditions of artistic renditions (repetitions of repetitions) which obscure difference while placing in doubt the possibility of a point of origin for either

the artist or his work. All is shown to be a re-creation, reproduction, repetition of something else.⁹ Paradoxically, it was perhaps this refusal to focus on differences which caused society to perceive of both Van Gogh and Artaud as "different" and somehow dangerous, as suggested in the play by Van Gogh's recognition that he has spent his life surrounded by people who have tried to convince him of their convictions (that differences are inherent?); but he knows "que las convicciones de los demás son tan débiles como las mías . . . por eso convencer al prójimo se hace tan perentorio, tan tranquilizador" (193). But, it is doubtlessly this very quality (their ability to see similarities, metaphors, rather than differences) which made Van Gogh and Artaud artists.

At the same time and paradoxically, with an almost Brechtian alienation effect, the production never let us forget that what we had before us was art. Although the audience identified closely with the character and felt a part of the action, there was nothing realistic or naturalistic about the play. The *cuervos* were played by people, dressed in black leotards with hard, white masks, but nonetheless, identifiable as human beings. Many of the actors wore their masks (which were often grotesque and distorted) throughout the play, continually reminding us that this was art. The Brechtian alienation effect was also underlined in the costumes, which were stylized and exaggerated, and by the fact that the characters, on occasion, defied the rules of logic: one of the characters was several feet taller than the normal human being, while yet another appeared suspended in mid-air. Furthermore, all of the actors played several different roles, and even Vincent, as character, recognized that he was playing a role: "Pueden ponerme las etiquetas que quieran, encerrarme, doparme, todo lo que necesiten hacer conmigo para sentirse justificados en el rol que la vida les ha destinado, les prometo cumplir prolijamente con mi papel de loco" (202). Thus we watched an actor playing a character playing another actor playing another character—in an infinite series of repetitions and reflections which ultimately call into doubt any possibility of a sense of order or difference as defined by society. Indeed, the play undermined our social, religious, artistic, intellectual structures, as for example when Artaud stated, "¿Pero cómo hacer comprender a un sabio que hay algo profundamente desordenado en la exactitud del cálculo diferencial, la teoría de los quanta o las obscenas y tan torpemente litúrgicas ordalías de la procesión de los equinoccios" (180-81). As a result the spectator is alienated from social mores and established truths and forced to examine the philosophical bases in a different and metaphorical light, much as Van Gogh examined the world in varying levels of light and shadow.

In addition, the moment when the action of the play stopped and several of the actors removed their masks precluded any failure on the part of the audience to recognize that what we had before us was art. This removal of the masks did provide a disconcerting twist, however, for once they were removed and the actors stood before us as performers (rather than characters), the distinguishing line between art and reality again dissolved, and we were led to the Pirandellian question as to which is art and which is "reality." How much of our own life is playacting? Or, as Hamlet queried, which is more "real," which is more theatrical, the player or his character? The point, not unlike



Vincent y los cuervos, Teatro del Bosque. Buenos Aires, 1984. Courtesy: Ernesto Aschieri, fotografías.

Pirandello's, is that these characters, who appeared so alien to our "reality," so "artificial" because of their stylized masks and absurd clothing, are just like us once their masks are removed; thus, the suggestion is that perhaps they reflect us even with their masks. In other words, perhaps we too are a series of disguises and role playing. Again, on some level we are the *cuervos* in spite of our identification with Van Gogh.

In the process of communicating its message to us, the production frequently relied on the use of nonverbal semiotic indicators. For example, two of the "characters" (significantly, the two who were buyers, consumers of art in the market place) were puppets. This was semiologically significant on at least two levels: first, once again the puppets underlined that what we witnessed was a dramatic re-creation (they were patently artistic renditions of human beings, suggesting that perhaps we too are mere reproduction, imitation); second, metaphorically they emphasized the puppet-like position of us all, incapable of thinking for ourselves as we "act" by allowing ourselves to be manipulated by social trends and pressures. My interpretation here was reinforced at another point in the play when Vincent stated, "Soy muy escéptico en cuanto a la posibilidad de elección de los seres humanos. A veces tengo la impresión de que no somos más que marionetas macabras y fugaces" (166). It is particularly significant that no attempt was made to hide or disguise the two puppeteers, both *cuervos*, who spoke for and operated the puppets. Indeed, they were nearly as visible to the audience as were the puppets themselves. Another eloquent, if indeed nonverbal, signifier was effectively employed when Van Gogh, who had chosen not to "see" Sean's past and the fact that she was a prostitute, was physically blindfolded. At yet another moment, the nonverbal signifiers were carefully coordinated with the discourse as when Vincent stated, "Tengo la impresión de asomarme a un precipicio inmenso y oscuro" (127), and that he was only precariously sustained on this "superficie cenagosa que llaman 'realidad'" (127-28). Portentously, at this precise moment he was at the edge of the "pit" in which the audience sat. Clearly, the significance here is double, for in the physical sense he was at the edge of the pit filled with the audience, society, the *cuervos* who threatened to destroy him, and he also faced the metaphoric "pit" of insanity, which perhaps appears no more threatening than the ever shifting "quagmire" of reality.

The Brechtian-style alienation effect was further accomplished by the fact that the play did not reproduce Van Gogh's entire life for us but rather presented a series of vignettes which presumably reflect significant moments, changing points in the artist's life, much like what we see in Brecht's own *Galileo* (which happened to be playing during the same season in Buenos Aires). Unlike *Galileo*, however, the O'Donnell work makes no attempt to present these moments in chronological order, and there is no suggestion that one is dependent upon the other, although surely all are viewed as contributing to Van Gogh's eventual suicide. Throughout the performance we moved chronologically forward and backward in a temporal oscillation that may well be intended as a reflection of Van Gogh's own preoccupation with time and his artistic attempts to capture its constant fluidity. Again, there was no pretense that what we had before us was anything but art, for the play began

at the end, at the moment when Vincent was about to commit suicide and when he had recently completed a painting, "Campo de trigo con cuervos," which was represented by an absence in the performance. In the published text, however, it is noted that in the painting "sólo se ve representado el campo de trigo, faltando los cuervos" (122). (Obviously, he need not paint in the *cuervos*, for we were right there in the audience.) Then, in perfect artistic circularity, the drama concluded with the moment of his suicide, as he finally inserted the *cuervos* into his work, producing them, not with paint, but rather (in another semiologically laden gesture) with fecal matter: "Lo hace con una actitud de poseído, como un inmenso acto final, su postrera e imprevisible victoria sobre el destino" (211). In another semiologically fecund gesture, the painting of the *cuervos* with the fecal matter was done in the performance (although not in the published text) on his bare chest, over his heart, rather than on a canvas.

At the same time, the Brechtian alienation effect was produced by the frequent stops and starts in the action. The dramatic presentation of scenes of Van Gogh's life was frequently interrupted by the character, Antonin Artaud, as he broke the dramatic tension to comment on the action we had just witnessed, to summarize an event omitted from the dramatization, and/or to draw an analogy between the events in the life of the Dutch painter and similar situations in the life of any artist, or indeed any rebel (particularly Latin American): "Así es como la sociedad mandó estrangular en sus manicomios a todos aquellos de quienes querían desembarazarse o defenderse, porque rechazaron convertirse en cómplices de algunas inmensas porquerías. Pues un loco es también un hombre al que la sociedad no ha querido escuchar y al que ha querido impedir que propalase verdades insoportables" (203).¹⁰ As Artaud interrupted the performance, all action stopped, often producing a scene reminiscent of a still life; the characters first froze into position and then gradually disappeared as the lights and our attention refocused on the French playwright. Also in Brechtian style, these interpolated breaks seemed carefully planned to occur just at those moments when we had become most emotionally involved in the play. For example, it was after we had adjusted to the dark theatre and begun to get "involved" that Artaud entered and spoke directly to us, commenting on what was being dramatized "on stage." He appeared among us again after we had witnessed a series of events in Van Gogh's life: his conflict with the art professor, his brother's express concern about the lack of commercial interest in his work and suggestion that he attempt to paint something that would appeal to public taste and sell, his failure as a pastor, his father's admonition that he organize his life and live a normal life, and his own recognition that all that awaits him is abnormality or perhaps insanity. After all this, Artaud (whom we had forgotten by then) stood among the audience to contradict what we had been led to believe, "No, van Gogh no estaba loco, pero sus telas eran como fuegos incendiarios, como bombas atómicas cuyo ángulo de visión, comparado con el de todos los cuadros que hacían furor en su época, hubiera sido capaz de perturbar gravemente el larval conformismo de la burguesía del Segundo Imperio. Porque lo que ataca la pintura de van Gogh no es determinado conformismo de las costumbres sino el de las mismas instituciones. . . . Con

mayor razón, en la escena social, las instituciones se descomponen y la medicina no es más que un cadáver inservible y hediondo que declara loco a van Gogh" (140). Obviously, such a speech jolted the spectator out of any emotional identification with the protagonist and forced him to consider Van Gogh intellectually rather than emotionally (which, of course, is precisely the function of the alienation effect as Brecht proposed it). At the conclusion of the speech the lights shifted, and once more we were induced back into the action of the play, in a procedure which was employed several more times during the course of the performance. Thus emotionally the audience was repeatedly pushed into and out of the "play" until we were disconcerted and doubtful about where one level began and another ended. Ultimately, of course, Artaud, our commentator and guide, who moved among us, was neither more nor less fictional than any other character (or perhaps even ourselves).

Thus the play returned circularly to conclude at the beginning, with Van Gogh's suicide, which was portrayed as the tempestuous, desperate act of an artist who had been prohibited from continuing his work, a man forced to differentiate, to separate life and art. Nevertheless, contrary to the commentaries of critics and spectators, the message of the play is not that Van Gogh was a martyr (one cannot be considered a martyr if one accomplishes nothing with one's "sacrificial" act, and Van Gogh obviously achieved nothing with his), nor that insanity is a form of lucidity.¹¹ The point of the play, as highlighted by this production, is that art must be fluid and plastic as is life and must say something about our "reality": "un artista debe desmontar ese orden, subvertirlo, para encontrar otro distinto, mejor" (158). The two cannot be neatly separated. Van Gogh spent his life trying to capture the fleeting moment, not to freeze it into a *naturaleza muerta* but rather to show it as a part of that ever-changing continuum, to show it as what it is—ceaseless permutation, which includes, combines, and synthesizes what we traditionally perceive of as antithetical: "¡y el torso de una mujer, por más bella que fuese, jamás esconde su condición de carne en vías de pudrirse desde el momento mismo del nacimiento!" (168-69). As Vincent notes ("exaltado"), "El arte no debe adornar, el arte es denuncia. El arte debe dar testimonio de lo verdadero y la verdad siempre duele" (152). In reference to a still life the two puppets/buyers are considering, he declares, "Se trata de una obra vulgar de un artista vulgar, un pintor que domina la técnica pero que no se plantea ninguna interrogación importante acerca de la vida ni de la muerte, una persona que acepta aquello que la realidad le impone *sin intentar llegar más allá, sin siquiera ponerla en duda*" (153, my emphasis).

Unequivocally, this production did try to go beyond, to put in doubt, our traditional ideas about art in general, and theatre in particular. It showed us that without his art, Van Gogh's life must end, for there is no life without art. Art and life become one. But, it also dramatized the Girard theory that as differences begin to weaken or disappear violence must erupt because the hierarchies can no longer be sustained.¹² Thus, the play has achieved the goal of art as expressed by Van Gogh: "justamente lo que el arte verdadero hace . . . es hacer estallar lo normal. El verdadero arte es desmesurado, transgresivo . . . un artista verdadero es una amenaza contra la vida normal" (140).¹³

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Notes

1. Nevertheless, in *Plays of Impasse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Carol Rosen does note that some plays and performances emphasize rather than attempt to eliminate that fourth wall which separates the audience from the artistic endeavor (152).

2. In August of 1984 I was fortunate to have the opportunity to speak at length with architect Alejandro Sago, the scenographer and assistant director of the production. I am grateful to him for some of the insights with which he provided me as well as for the photographs which appear here.

3. Quoted from personal correspondence with Sago.

4. I would note that the overhead net did have its disadvantages too. If nothing else, it made the audience a bit nervous, concerned that the characters overhead would fall and hurt themselves and/or us.

5. Sitting on the paint can, one is indeed reminded of Eduardo Pavlovsky's complaint in *La mucca* that "los espectadores sensibles están siempre sentados en sillones demasiado cómodos, demasiado inmóviles para ver la realidad" (Buenos Aires: Talia, n.d.) 33.

6. Obviously, the words of any play are indeed intended for the spectator. It is only by dramatic convention that we accept that they are intended for another character.

7. I refer specifically here to Jacques Derrida's theories of difference and lack of origins, as developed in *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967); "La différence," in Michel Foucault, et al., *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968) 41-66; *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967). René Girard develops his theory of violence and its relationship to our perception of difference in *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977).

8. Obviously, there are some significant parallels between Artaud's life and Van Gogh's that would stimulate interest in the latter on the part of the former.

9. The notion that all is repetition and reproduction is well developed by Derrida in the works cited above. In addition, Harold Bloom has maintained that all artistic production is reproduction, influenced by prior productions. See *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

10. The analogy between Van Gogh and other named social rebels, particularly Latin Americans, does not form a part of the published text.

11. For example, a review of the play which appeared in *La Nación* on July 17, 1984 (sec. 2:2), noted, "Los cuervos, en definitiva, no son más que la visión deformada de Van Gogh sobre la realidad. Sostener lo contrario es suponer que la locura es una de las formas de la lucidez. El razonamiento nos acercaría a una falacia. Pensar, por ejemplo, que Antonin Artaud llegó al hospicio solamente porque fue un incomprendido y que Jean Genet pasó gran parte de su vida en las cárceles porque la sociedad no entendió que los genios tienen permiso para la delincuencia." Again, I would argue that the play is not promulgating any of these ideas.

12. Girard notes, "It is not the differences but the loss of them that gives rise to violence and chaos." See *Violence and the Sacred* 51.

13. Curiously, Severo Sarduy sustains a similar theory in *Barroco*, in spite of the apparent separation (difference) between the two artists: "Ser barroco hoy significa amenazar, juzgar y parodiar la economía burguesa. . . . El barroco subvierte el orden supuestamente normal de las cosas . . . subvierte y deforma el trazo, que la tradición idealista supone perfecto entre todos, del círculo." See *Barroco* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1974) 99-100.

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