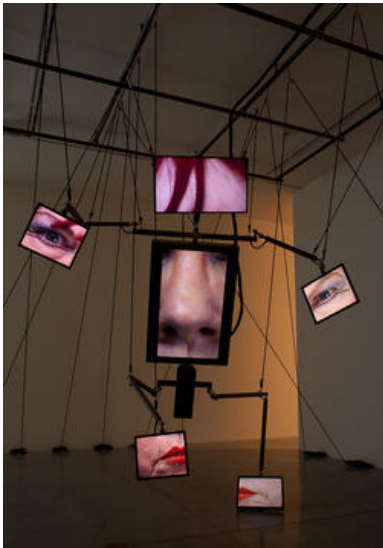


## Terry Allen at L.A. Louver

### Texan artist offers a Western take on the patron saint of artistic madness, Antonin Artaud

By Gustavo Turner

David Byrne, **former** Talking Heads leader and urbane cultural weather vane, wrote in his public online journal in January 2008: "Went up to MASS MoCA — the contemporary art center in far western Massachusetts — where my friends Terry and Jo Harvey Allen were showing a music-theater piece in progress about Antonin Artaud.



*MOMO Lo Mismo*: Terry Allen's Artaud-inspired puppet featuring Jo Harvey Allen's face

"It's a great piece," Byrne continued, "covering the period when Artaud completely lost his mind and was strapped to an iron bed in a straitjacket in the hold of a ship. He was being sent back to France, after causing trouble in Ireland, where he lived out the rest of his days in an insane asylum called Rodez. (Oddly, his asylum days were also very productive!)"

Byrne has long been an evangelist for Terry Allen. So has maverick art critic Dave Hickey, who has known the Texas-born artist/conceptualist/country singer since the late '60s, and has written extensively about him. So have legendary L.A. artist Ed Ruscha, the people in charge of doling out Guggenheim and NEA fellowships and Allen's representatives at the prestigious L.A. Louver gallery down by Venice Beach.

**It's at L.A. Louver** that Allen now is showing the latest, fully developed version of "Ghost Ship Rodez: The Momo Chronicles," the project about the French playwright and theater revolutionary Artaud that so impressed Byrne three years ago.

Byrne's description of the work as "a music-theater piece in progress" was only partially right: "Ghost Ship Rodez" — like most of Terry Allen's works — exists not as a singular "piece" but rather as a group of pieces across several media. In this case, Allen's "fictional investigation" (his description) into Artaud's mind between his breakdown in 1937 and his death in a mental institution in 1948 includes a recording of the stage show (with songs); a series of ink, pencil, gouache and pastel drawings and collages; and two large installations: *MOMO Lo Mismo*, an enormous puppet made of video screens, and the titular *Ghost Ship* itself, the skeleton of a hull floating over a sea of words.

The L.A. Louver show is less expansive than previous Allen multimedia spectacles. Unlike his most recent L.A. show — 2004's "DUGOUT," an autobiographical exploration of Cold War fears, among other things — the narrower focus of "Ghost Ship Rodez" is on the figure of Artaud (his face in particular), his mental breakdown, and the feverish journeys he undertook after his period of triumph and disillusionment as a surrealist figurehead in 1920s and 1930s Paris.

Allen graduated from Chouinard Art Institute in L.A. in the mid-'60s. For his generation, Artaud's theories of artistic abandon (and his personal derangement) provided irresistible inspiration.

"There was kind of a crosshatching of people from the '60s and the '50s that were really influenced by Artaud," Allen told us by phone from his home in Santa Fe, N.M., where he has lived since 1987. "People like the Living Theatre, and Peter Brook and Sam Shepard. Artaud kind of pre-dated all of that. He was a surrealist and he was actually kicked out of the surrealist party when they decided they wanted to be Marxist, because he didn't think that art should be in any way anything other than totally independent and individual."

The Texan artist's first encounter with Artaud was marked by a visual attraction. Around 1964, Allen says, he found a book at San Francisco's City Lights bookstore, *Artaud Anthology*, edited and translated by Jack Hirschman. "I think it was probably one of the first books that had a good chunk of translations of Artaud's writings in English. Anyway, this book had a number of photographs of his face — you could see his face — which was incredibly compelling to me. I had never heard of him, didn't even know who he was. I actually asked [poet Lawrence] Ferlinghetti, who owned the bookstore and was behind the counter. I said, 'Look, I don't have any money, but I really have to have this book.' And he just said, 'Take the book.'" He laughs. "And that's kind of how I was introduced to Artaud."

Over the years, Allen explored the work of Artaud as his own artistic practice became more and more entangled with stage performances, as he gained a following as an outlaw country performer. In Allen's work, Artaud's surrealist mandate to freely roam the disturbing landscapes of the psyche was filtered through the foundational libertarian fantasies of the American West. Artaud's fundamental text, *The Theater and Its Double*, "really expanded his whole idea about taking everything as far as you can possibly take it and then take it further than that, whether it was art or religion or his body or whatever," Allen explains. "He was that kind of a madman."

Madness and art are familiar themes in Allen's work, but the real surprise in "Ghost Ship Rodez" is how his most characteristic environment — a broad "Western" space that includes the Texas panhandle, New Mexico, California and Mexico — fit his peculiar vision of Artaud's descent into the most unstable period of his life and career.

Allen uses Artaud's 1936 trip to Mexico (where he bounced around giving dismally attended lectures, engaging in quarrels and trying to crash peyote rituals) as a way of turning the European playwright into a doomed wanderer of the Western wasteland, a typical character in Allen's work. The folk-art lettering, map shapes and nature imagery of Allen's past work figure prominently. In the "radio play," the recorded version of a stage show that is piped in through headphones at a listening station in the gallery, even the country songs Allen is known for, are made to fit the plight of the brain-sick Artaud. An earlier Allen composition, the haunting "Do They Dream of Hell in Heaven?" has been repurposed as leitmotif on the recording.

**The French culturati** at the art organization that first commissioned the piece initially were nervous about Allen's act of portraying a famous French theorist via iconography of the American West. "We were there a month in 2006 building this piece," Allen explains, "and they were concerned at first that the French audience (which can be pretty cold-blooded) could be real resistant to what we were trying to do. Especially since we were coming from 'Bush Country,' as they called it. France and the U.S. government were not on good terms at that particular time, so we caught a little of that political tide."

An American expat was hired to mollify the difficult French audience by explaining the challenging English text, delivered with a twang by Allen's wife, Jo Harvey Allen. He recalls, "'It took somebody from Bush Country to bring Artaud back to the French people,' they wrote, which was over the top, of course!"

In the work, Allen turns Artaud into a kind of Malcolm Lowry character, a not-so-innocent abroad looking for redemption in all the wrong places — a common country music trope as well. Lowry, the addled, boozy British writer of *Under the Volcano*, looms large in Allen's imagination: A 2010 book that surveys Allen's career (a collaboration of sorts with pal Hickey) begins with an epigraph by Lowry, a prayer asking God for help in making art out of seemingly random obsession. "If my motives are obscure, and the notes scattered and often meaningless, please help me to order it, or I am lost. ..."

Hickey points out that Allen, like most songwriters, is a devoted notebook keeper, collecting "hundreds of them, shelves of them, accumulated over the years, filled with scraps of texts, pieces of lyrics, scrapbook images pasted in, drawings, schemata and lists."

Whether Artaud's work and influence gave him, posthumously, that fragile order out of chaos that Lowry and Allen longed for, or whether he died lost is debatable. Allen hints at an answer in a simple drawing he calls *Smile (Momo Chronicles)*. It's a straightforward black-ink portrait of Artaud's aged face, that face that originally fascinated him at City Lights bookstore in the '60s. *Momo*, an endearing word for a holy fool, is what Artaud called himself in his madness. Over Momo's impenetrable mouth, Allen superimposes a blood-red smile.

*Terry Allen's "Ghost Ship Rodez: The Momo Chronicles" is on view at L.A. Louver until April 16.*

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