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Tadeusz Kantor

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Brief orientation

Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990) was a Polish visual artist and theatre director. He can be placed among a select group of the twentieth century's most influential theatre practitioners. The stages of his artistic career, including his work with the Cricot 2 Theatre, his presence on stage during each production, and his theories of theatre not only challenged, but also expanded the boundaries of traditional and non-traditional theatre and performance forms. Kantor was a painter, theatre director, stage designer, actor, writer, and theoretician. He continued his experiments with painterly techniques on stage and vice versa, as his stage designs from the 1950s and his theatre productions from the 1950s and 1960s contained many ideas about the attributes of space and matter which he had explored on his canvases. His notes, the so-called "partyturas," not only provided a record of the events on stage, but also a theoretical background for understanding the shifts in his theories of visual arts and theatre.

The breadth and diversity of his artistic endeavour position Kantor within the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. He started to paint and stage plays during the modernist revolution, which had been instigated by the first wave avant-garde in France, the Soviet Union, and Poland in the 1920s and 1930s. His experiments with Informel Art, Emballages (from French "emballer": to wrap), and Happenings took place in the 1950s and 1960s during the time of the post-war European and American second wave avant-garde. His most widely known productions, outside of Poland, *The Dead Class* (1975), *Wielopole*, *Wielopole* (1980), *Let the Artists Die* (1985), *I Shall Never Return* (1988), *The Silent Night* (1990), and *Today is my Birthday* (1990) co-existed with diverse forms of postmodern art and theatre.

One of the characteristic features of the Cricot 2 Theatre was that Kantor was present on stage during every performance. He would comment on the action on stage, correct the actor's gestures, or, as was the case in *I Shall Never Return*, he would participate in the events unfolding on stage. Over the years, critics had offered different interpretations of his haunting presence on stage. Even though multiple interpretations will continue to exist, it could be suggested that, at least since *The Dead Class*, while the actors were to represent Kantor's memories on stage, he was needed to correct their actions depending on how he remembered or claimed to remember the events being "acted out" by them in the performance space.

Today, his legacy is preserved and promoted by Cricoteka, The Centre of the documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor, founded by Kantor as the Centre of the Cricot 2 Theatre in 1980. It offers a unique collection of his theoretical essays, drawings, and objects/machines used in his productions since 1942; as well as books, journals, production reviews, video and photographic documentation about Kantor's and the Cricot 2 Theatre's artistic journey.

Developments

Kantor was introduced to symbolism, constructivism, and Bauhaus while studying painting and stage design at the Academy of Fine Arts (1933-39) in Kraków. In 1938, he founded the Ephemeric (Mechanic) Theatre, where he presented Maurice Maeterlinck's *Death of Tintagiles*. In 1942, with a group of young painters, Kantor organised the underground, experimental Independent Theatre in Kraków during the Nazi occupation where he directed Juliusz Słowacki's *Balladyna* (1942) and Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Return of Odysseus* (1944). As noted by Kantor in his "Lesson 1" of *The Milano Lessons*, this production was instrumental in the creation of his concepts of an autonomous theatre, poor object, object-actor, and the reality of the lowest rank:

Abstraction, which existed in Poland until the outbreak of World War II, disappeared in the period of mass genocide. [. . .] The work of art lost its power. Aesthetic re?production lost its power. The anger of a human being trapped by other human beasts cursed A R T. We had only the strength to grab the nearest thing, THE REAL OBJECT and to call it a work of art! Yet, it was a POOR object, unable to perform any functions in life, an object about to be discarded (Kantor in Kobialka 1993: 211-12).

The experience of World War II made Kantor question existing conventions of creating or displaying art that had found (and continued to do so) a successful way of evading Theodor Adorno's 1949/1962 haunting question of what it meant to write lyric poetry or represent reality after Auschwitz. In 1944, Kantor seemed to address this dilemma in his production of *The Return of Odysseus* when he intimated that

Odysseus refused categorically to be only an image, a representation. [. . .] In times of madness created by men, in times of war, death and its frightening troupes, which refused to be shackled by Reason and Human Senses, burst into and merged with the sphere of life. (274)

The pathos of drama and its mythological character were thrown into and merged with the war reality. As noted by Kantor, in times of madness, reality could not be the source of a work of art, unless it is accepted that genocide had already become part of the cultural heritage. Rather, "Reality can only be 'u s e d.' [...] Making use of reality in a r t signifies an annexation of reality" (96-7). Thus, the reality of Kraków in 1944 was not subjugated to being moulded by formal requirements; neither was it filtered through a Platonic or Aristotelian concept of representation. The play was staged not in a theatre building, since all artistic activities advancing Polish art were banned by the Nazis, but in a private apartment. "The bent figure of a helmeted soldier wearing a faded overcoat [of a German soldier] stood against the wall. On this day, June 6, 1944, he became a part of this room" (272). Into this room, the performers brought different objects found in the war zone: a cartwheel smeared with mud, a decayed wooden board, a scaffold spattered with plaster, a decrepit loud?speaker puncturing the air with screeching war announcements, and a kitchen chair. These were found objects; discarded, and useless. The object's function was not assigned by an artistic convention that was currently compromised by the war's condition, but by a performative process outside of the normative artistic categories establishing the object's objectness in a relationship with other elements (objects and humans) positioned in space.

In 1947, Kantor received a stipend for a trip to Paris where he encountered the abstract and mystical works by Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Max Ernst, and Jean Miró and the new canvases of heavy texture and

intense energy by Yves Tanguy and Hans Hartung. Upon his return to Poland, Kantor, with other avant-garde artists, including the members of the pre-war Kraków Group and the post-war generation of painters, organized an exhibition in Kraków in 1948 to showcase avant-garde movements emerging in post-war Poland. When freedom of artistic expression was curbed in June 1949 with the introduction of socialist realism, Kantor, who could not exhibit, worked as a stage designer, continuing his experiments with abstract art in a theatrical space. In 1955, during the so-called political “thaw” in Poland after Stalin’s death in March 1953, Kantor travelled again to Paris where he saw *l’art informel* – spatial improvisations examining the texture of compositions – of Wols, Jean Fautrier, Georges Mathieu, and Jackson Pollock.

These experiments were given a theatrical form in 1956, when Kantor created with Maria Jarema the Cricot 2 Theatre in Kraków. In the first production of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz’s (Witkacy’s) *The Cuttlefish* (1956), which, like *The Return of Odysseus* and the subsequent Cricot 2 productions, was presented in non-traditional performance spaces (a room, a café, a gallery space, etc.), environment, objects, and actors constituted autonomous spatial formations in order to unblock an imagination constrained by the play’s text and theatrical convention alike. In “Informel Theatre” (*The Country House*, 1961), Kantor explored matter “which is freed from abiding by the laws of reality, is always changing and fluid; [and] escapes the bondage of rational definitions” (Kantor in Kobińska 1993: 51). In the “Zero Theatre” (*The Madman and the Nun*, 1963), Kantor nullified the illusionary reality of the text by discarding the emotions it demanded. Scenes were constructed not by textual reference, but by reference to paratextual associations prompted by “the Annihilation Machine,” a construction made of folding chairs, whose movements prevented the actors from presenting the plot of the play. The actors were brought to what Kantor called “zero zones” where the actor could no longer create the illusion of another character but could only represent him/herself. In “Theatre-Happening” (*The Water-Hen*, 1967), Kantor drew attention to everyday realness and its potential for being a non-conceptual object in the Adornian sense disclosing the falsehood of illusion and its pre-assigned meanings and emotional states. In the “Impossible Theatre” (*Dainty Shapes and Hair Apes*, 1973), Kantor explored the impossibility of grasping and interpreting a work of art from the audiences’ perspective (Kantor in Kobińska 1993: 301).

“The Impossible Theatre” was the last transformation in Kantor’s theory of the autonomous work of art and theatre. His experiments with the Autonomous, Informel, Zero, Happening, and Impossible theatres, each in their own way, questioned the traditional idea of Aristotelian and Platonic representation as an affirmation of life. However, as “The Impossible Theatre” manifesto indicates, Kantor started to question the process of depreciating the value of reality, real place, or real object. Now he turned in the direction of theatre which would attempt to express the most intimate thought processes that occur in the artist’s private space, his/her imagination, or, as Kantor would say in 1988, to the theatre of personal confessions (Kantor in Kobińska 2009: 389).

“The Theatre of Death” Manifesto (1975) articulated a shift in Kantor’s theatre experiments. The productions that followed explored the notions of memory, history, myth, artistic creation, and the function of the artist as the chronicler of the twentieth century: *The Dead Class* (1975), *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), *Let the Artists Die* (1985), *I Shall Never Return* (1988), and *Today is My Birthday* (1990).

Avant-garde Strategies and Content

Even though Kantor considered himself an inheritor of Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Art, and Informel Art, he often emphasised the differences between those artistic programmes and his own. Thus, for example, Suprematist geometric or abstract forms, which were to obliterate or transcend both historical events such as World War I or World War II, as well as the commodification of the arts, came into contact with Kantor’s reality of the lowest rank – a degraded form of reality stripped of its signifying features by the war events. As evidenced by *The Return of Odysseus* (1944), the process of constructing the objects in the

performance space by accident, coincidence, risk, and surprise was refractory in both senses of the word: as a negation of and deviation from historical conditions:

This object was empty.

It had to justify its being to itself rather than to the surroundings which were foreign to it.

[By so doing, the object] revealed its own existence.

And when its function was imposed upon it, this act was seen as if it were happening for the first time since the moment of creation.

In *The Return of Odysseus*, Penelope, sitting on a kitchen chair, performed the act of being “seated” as a human act happening for the first time. (Kantor quoted in Kobialka 1993: 211-12)

The degraded reality or the reality of the lowest rank did not function as an artistic strategy, but rather as a tactical manoeuvre, which allowed the artist to be “surprised, accidentally and unexpectedly, by the unknown and ignored sphere of reality which intervenes in art” (Borowski 1982: 76). This unknown and ignored sphere of reality was a clear reference to the historical reality of World War II and a post-war Polish political reality dominated by the aesthetics of socialist realism and traditional theatre practices. In Kantor’s production of Witkacy’s *The Cuttlefish* (1956), the auditorium was a café, where many things happened simultaneously and accidentally, despite the fact that *The Cuttlefish* was supposed to be presented there. The staging of the play was on equal footing with other, equally accidental events taking place there that evening. *The Cuttlefish* was built around three forms or elements: the environment, objects, and actors. Positioned within the boundaries of a space where any definition of their “essences” was possible, they engaged in an intricate and complex process of constituting diverse spatial formations rather than presenting Witkacy’s playtext. The discrepancies between the stage action and the playtext are addressed in Kantor’s manifesto of the autonomous theatre, which, for him, was not a reproductive mechanism, but a mechanism which had its own independent existence (Kantor in Kobialka 2009: 123).

This exploration of the unknown, hidden, or everyday aspect of political and artistic reality took on different forms at different times in the 1960s. In “Informel Theatre” (1961), Kantor explored matter—

[an unknown aspect of REALITY or of its elementary state], which is freed from abiding by the laws of reality, is always changing and fluid; it escapes the bondage of rational definitions; it makes all attempts to compress it into a solid form ridiculous, helpless, and vain; it is perennially destructive to all forms, and nothing more than a manifestation; it is accessible only through the forces of destruction, by whim and risk of COINCIDENCE, by fast and violent action. (Kantor in Kobialka 2009: 141)

In his “Zero Theatre” (1963), Kantor used a mechanised construction made of folding chairs, “The Annihilation Machine,” whose robot-like movements and annoying sounds destroyed any possibility of executing the dramatic action of Witkacy’s *The Madman and the Nun* on stage. The machine not only dismembered plot development but also disrupted the actors’ ability to recreate the characters’ emotions

assigned to them by the text. Instead, the actors exhibited their own emotions of apathy, melancholy, exhaustion, dissociation, neurosis, depression, frustration, and boredom, which described their fight against the machine. In this system, they eliminated their dependence on the arrangement, which existed outside of them (the text), and gained autonomy by exposing only themselves and their emotions rather than their characters and their characters' emotions. Kantor's illusion-crushing process was his antidote to traditional theatre and what he considered its "thoughtless procreation of forms." As he noted:

The traditional technique of plot development made use of human life as a springboard for movement upward toward the realm of growing and intensified passions, heroism, conflict, and violent reactions. When it first emerged, this idea of "growth" signified man's tragic expansion, or a heroic struggle to transcend human dimensions and destinies. With the passing of time, it turned into a mere show requiring powerful elements of spectacle and the acceptance of violent and irresponsible illusion—convincing shapes and a thoughtless procreation of forms. (Kantor in Kobialka 2009: 144)

In "Happening Theatre" (1967), Kantor drew attention to everyday realness and its potential for being a nonconceptual medium or a "ready-made" object "which [had] been found; an object whose structure [was] dense and its identity [was] delineated by its own fiction, illusion, and psychophysical dimension." Moreover,

Having gone through the deformed and sputtering matter of Informel and touched upon the nothingness and the zero zone, one reaches the object "from behind," where the distinction between reality and art does not exist. . . . The object simply exists. This statement has irrevocably depreciated the notions of: expression, interpretation, metaphor, and similar devices. In my treatment of [Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's] *The Water Hen*, I have tried to avoid an unnecessary construction of elements. I have introduced into it not only objects but also their characteristics, and READY-MADE events which were already moulded. [...] An object ought to be won over and possessed rather than depicted or shown. (Kantor in Kobialka 1993: 85)

The logic of activating that which is repressed or glossed over in the object or subject by a stage interpretation, framed Kantor's Happenings in the period between 1965 and 1969: *Cricotage* (December 10, 1965), *A Demarcation Line* (December 18, 1965), *A Grand Emballage* (October 20–November 1, 1966), *A Letter* (January 12, 1967), *A Panoramic Sea-Happening* (August 23–27, 1967), *Homage to Maria Jarema* (October 30, 1967), *A Winter Assemblage* (January 18, 1969), and *A Lesson According to Rembrandt* (March, 1969). Though linked conceptually to the Happenings in the West, which expressed a rebellion against the consumer society and/or figurative representation of reality (Pierre Restany, Yves Klein, Mimmo Rotella, Raymond Hains, Arman, Niki de Saint-Phalle, Otto Piene, Heinz Mack, Günter Vecker, Wolf Vostell, or Joseph Beuys), Kantor's Happenings were an extension of his particular and singular understanding of the concepts of the reality of the lowest rank; of an object and its objectness; of matter and space; of the autonomous work of art; and, finally, of his understanding of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century (especially Dada and Surrealism). Using the medium of a Happening, Kantor engaged in the process of challenging what he had perceived as official art or mass culture in a socialist Poland. He did so in the process of deterritorializing representation by surrounding himself with objects that could no longer be or were not yet appropriated by accepted artistic conventions or commodified into an assigned use-value.

Kantor's writings about the materialisation of an object (in a production or in a work of art), which resisted assimilation by any "official" cultural system, bring to mind Jean-François Lyotard's statement in "Music, Mute" that "the art of the work of art is a gesture of space-time-matter, the art of the musical score, a gesture of space-time-sound" (Lyotard 1997: 217). If indeed a work of art is a gesture, this gesture, however, should not be confused with the process of representing an object or with the means of addressing a goal or a purpose of an action; neither should it be viewed in terms of aesthetics. "The gesture," as Giorgio Agamben notes, "is the exhibition of mediality: it is a process of making a means visible as such" (2000: 57). It suffices to look at the work of such diverse artists as Hanna Höch, Elaine de Kooning, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, Agnes Martin, Pollock, Josef Albers, Barnett Newman, Max Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Jean Dubuffet, Fautrier, Mathieu, Henri Michaux, Antoni Tàpies, Hans Hartung, Wols, Alberto Burri, Jannis Kounellis, Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, or Jasper Jones in order to understand this exhibition of mediality. This exhibition of mediality is made visible in and can be described by a series of tensions: the tension between the inherent structure of a work of art and a social striation; or, to paraphrase Agamben, between the emergence of a being-in-a-medium of beings, which opens the ethical dimension in the understanding of presence and commodification, which erases the specificity of the medium.

This gesture was not a semantic or ethnographic sign operating within a particular culture, an emphatic movement of the body, or a Brechtian *gestus* conveying particular social attitudes adopted by the speaker toward other people (Brecht 1986: 104). This gesture was the exploration of the attributes of the object – the exploration of the object's objectness, to use Kantor's phrase, rather than its pre-assigned meaning or use value. This object's objectness is matter that is located in a specific space and time shaped by contingencies of a historical moment. Kantor offered a praxis which troubled the recognised reality, or the object, by bringing to the fore those aspect of reality, or the object, which hitherto had been dismissed or considered illegitimate. Kantor by no means represented or deformed reality, the real, or the everyday. Reality was taken up and annexed, as noted in "The Impossible Theatre" Manifesto (Kantor in Kobialka 1993: 96-7). Both reality and its content were viewed as fully formed ready-mades. Kantor annexed reality in order to liberate objects from the bondage of moral or aesthetic utility (Kobialka 2009: 181-2).

"The Impossible Theatre" (1973) ended the process Kantor had started with his 1944 production of *The Return of Odysseys* of dismantling illusions and questioning the theatrical conventions associated both with traditional representational practices and the artistic *status quo* of the day. This praxis, while it lasted, was a powerful answer to political, social, and cultural reality and indeed liberated matter, objects, and everyday realness from the bondage of utility. However, it became clear to him that, in the process of dismantling illusion and traditional theatrical conventions, Kantor inadvertently created his own system, which – like the Aristotelian and Platonic system of representation he contested – produced its own theatrical space and its own commentary in the process of referencing past productions and becoming a representation of, rather than an answer to, reality as he had intended. Consequently, Kantor abandoned this praxis for an entirely different project – a theatre of intimate/personal commentaries or a theatre of memory, in which mnemonic space replaced the conventional space of representation.

Kantor offered us a unique understanding of memory and history in his theatre of intimate commentaries: *The Dead Class* (1975), *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), *Let the Artists Die* (1985), and *I Shall Never Return* (1988). The productions resist the traditional understanding of memory as a sociogenetic force by bringing to the fore not what memory is or how it functions, but mnemotechnics – the technology of remembering what one remembers, how one remembers, and why one remembers what one remembers.

What were these personal confessions or memories of Kantor's and how were they remembered? In *The Dead Class*, Kantor's opening vision of an infinite emptiness of "a classroom" was separated from the auditorium by a rope and was filled with the Old People in school desks regressing into the past in their present moment. They could never be dead, for, though deceased, the dead live in our memory of them.

The audience could have no memories of these dead, for the Old People were subject to Kantor's desire to make them be what he or his autobiography wanted them to be. These self-representations took the form of a new spoken language (the phonetic exercises), a process for constituting and reconstituting historical events (the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, the announcement of World War I), a method for probing into the concept of how and by whom history has been written (memories of history lessons about Solomon, King David, Cleopatra, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, and about Polish and world history), a way to bring to life the forgotten/annihilated history of Galician Jews, and a way to celebrate traditions (the ceremony of the Polish Forefather's Eve). In *Wielopole, Wielopole*, the inhabitants of his "room of memory" – a name given to his mnemonic space – allowed Kantor to explore his thoughts about life and death, about his family and the WWII events, as well as about Christianity and Judaism. *Let the Artists Die* addressed the condition of an artist in contemporary society. In his commentaries on *Let the Artists Die*, Kantor indicated that the space that was entered was neither a classroom with school desks in the corner or a room which was constructed and reconstructed by Kantor, but a room of memory, where everything was happening at once, whose shape was altered by the characters and forces invading it from behind the doors. For this reason, the old name, "the room of memory," was abandoned and a new name was introduced "the storeroom of memory," a place where characters from all different past events would meet. The "wayfarers" appearing in the storeroom of memory would bring their different, individual memories with them. These memories, as *Wielopole, Wielopole* unequivocally asserted, could never be presented in a chronological order, rather, as Kantor insisted in this production, they were assembled, as if they were the frames of a film?negative stacked one on top of another. The negatives of his private life, history, and art converged and diverged in order to reveal the landscape where Kantor staged his battle against "official" History. His individual human life was set against the "consumerism of the world" even at the price of "pain, suffering, despair, and then shame, humiliation, derision" (Kantor in Kobialka 2009: 393). Unlike in previous productions where Kantor would be on stage organising his room of memory while the audience was entering the performance space, in *I Shall Never Return* the performance space – the "inn" – exists somewhere on a forgotten Street of Dreams: a new version of Kantor's mnemonic space, where Kantor was to encounter objects and people, who kept emerging, disappearing, and re-emerging at different stages of Kantor's life and history. Together, they were here in this space beyond time and beyond all rules to testify to the generation that witnessed genocide and terrorist attacks on art and culture. The historical fragments of the past and the shreds of artistic or personal memories – Kantor's ready-made objects – were transformed into the Grand Emballage of the end of the twentieth century in order to save these fragments from oblivion. In *Today is my Birthday*, the space between the frames became the focal point of the discourse where diverse traces of past artistic representations, private recollections, accidental events, and historical narratives came to life to claim some degree of reality, before they dissipated into the space of unregulated relationships. The irrepressible chaos was beyond becoming a "framed" singular narrative about the staging of a difficult past.

Conclusion

Kantor's theatre meant a radical departure from, or rupture within, the known and accepted normative representational categories and recognisable theatrical structures. Kantor's theatre and its components, such as a poor/real object, reality of the lowest rank, an autonomous work of art, zero zones, the impossible condition, and the complex mnemotechnics, were never stable, but were given different shapes and meanings depending on the pressures of the historical, cultural, and ideological networks of relations within which Kantor found himself positioned. It could be suggested that Kantor's theatre practice elaborated the "initial forgetting" – a forgetting prompted by the *status quo* and by commodified representational structures – which was so poignantly described by Jean-François Lyotard on the pages of *The Postmodern Explained*.

If indeed theatre is a network of specifiable and differential relationships elaborating the “initial forgetting,” Kantor’s presence on stage in every production as well as his interaction with the actors can be seen as a practice that gives visibility and materiality to the unthinkable thought, the inside of the unrepresentable outside, and the fold through which the outside comes into being to disrupt the history of forms.

At the same time, since Kantor’s productions never adhered to a linear progression of dramaturgical time, but, through the use of repetition and echo, warped the linear, theatrical time, it could be suggested that Kantor, as Agamben would have it, presented us with kairological time, disrupting a smooth mimetic surface and liberating humans to think thoughts anew in their relation not to the preestablished conventions and categories but to other objects in the field of perception. This differential specificity, in which a thought is rearticulated, perturbs the regime of truth in history or the culture industry. Examples of this practice abound in many of Kantor’s productions from *The Return of Odysseus* (1944) to the *Happenings* (1965-69), and to the theatre of memory/personal confessions (1975-1990).

Kantor’s theatre experiments with objects, matter, and space and his chronicling of the official and unofficial history of the twentieth century are a testimony to his belief that theatre, as he noted, “is an activity that occurs if life is pushed to its final limits, where all categories and concepts lose their meaning and right to exist; where madness, fever, hysteria, and hallucination are the last barricades of life before the approaching TROUPES OF DEATH and death’s GRAND THEATRE” (Kantor in Kobialka 1993: 149). Kantor’s theatre was not only an activity which occurs if life is pushed to its final limits but was an art form that was an answer to, rather than a representation of, reality. It brings to mind the notion of refractory art: Kantor’s theatre was refractory both as a negation of the status quo and as a deviation from the dominant artistic conventions in service of any official cultural system or culture industry. Tadeusz Kantor and his theatre practice are a visual testimony to and an elaboration of this thought.

Further reading

Please note that Tadeusz Kantor’s theoretical writings and manifestos quoted in this essay can be found in Michal Kobialka’s *A Journey Through Other Spaces* (1993) and in *Further on, Nothing* (2009).

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