

Tadeusz Kantor's Meetings With Life and Art

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Tadeusz Kantor was born during World War I; he was a young man during World War II. Later, for his own purposes, he liked to juxtapose these periods: the time of the Zurich Dada (1916) and the time he lived in Kraków during the German occupation (World War II). Even though he saw the Dada works when they were already museum pieces, their spirit of revolt and protest against the officially recognized artistic conventions and sacred sites would fascinate Kantor for many years to come. More importantly, as he observed [in the Twelfth Milano Lesson, "Before the End of the Twentieth Century"], he was aware of his Dada heritage and his Dada lineage, though "he did not know the name of his father." When he made this statement, Kantor had in mind his experiments with the Underground Independent Theatre [1942-44]. By making this parallel between his own work [during World War II] and that of Dada as well as the Dada heritage, Kantor wanted to identify his protest against conventional art with that of Dada, but also to show the differences between himself and Dada. He had his reasons for doing so. In a room destroyed by war, where Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Return of Odysseus* was staged in 1944, "ready-made objects" pulled out from the war reality were gathered together: an old, decayed, wooden board; a cart wheel smeared with mud; a military loudspeaker hanging on a rusty, metal rope; an old gun barrel. Odysseus, who sat on the gun barrel, was not the mythological Odysseus but a contemporary soldier wearing a dirty, faded overcoat and a helmet pulled down over his eyes. When the soldier said, "I am Odysseus. I have returned from Troy," he was in reality the wreckage of a human being returning to Kraków from the battle of Stalingrad. Kantor was not interested in a literal staging of the text; the text was secondary. What was essential in the production was that the objects taken directly from the reality and realness of everyday life would be used to constitute the stage action. It was with the help of these objects, rather than with the help of their preassigned metaphoric or dramaturgical functions, that Kantor wanted to show that the action on stage was the only reality. Drama did not take place on stage, he contended, but was created and developed in front of the audience.

This mode of thinking, comparable to that of the Dadaists, had a significant impact on Kantor's future artistic endeavors. What characterized it was his conviction, his response to the war reality: "There is no work of art! (Later this statement was given a more intellectual tone: the work of art was put into question). . . . There is only an object wrenched from reality and life (art history labelled with a more refined term: 'a ready-made'). . . . There is no artistic place

(such as a museum or a theatre), there is only a real place (a room destroyed by war activities, a railway station, a staircase where Odysseus returned from Troy). . . . Poverty was substituted for refined and sublime aesthetic values." This statement makes us realize that, on the one hand, Kantor's was an artistic challenge to the compressed intensity of the war experience, and, on the other hand, a belated discovery of Dada. Consequently, the artist manifested his own artistic independence as well as his desire to participate in the important changes taking place in the world of art. At the same time, Kantor lived and created art in a real and specifiable location and country—Kraków, Poland. As was the case with other countries in this part of Europe, Poland had been was molded by two consecutive totalitarian systems and was isolated from the West. It was under these conditions of repression and separation that the credos of artists struggling to survive and develop their artistic ideas were written. They acquired varied, often surprising, forms. Having graduated from Kraków's Academy of Fine Arts in 1939, Kantor found himself in the milieu of young artists and intellectuals. Some of them, for example, Tadeusz Brzozowski, Jerzy Nowosielski, Jerzy Skarżyński, or professor Mieczysław Porębski, are today among the leading representatives of Polish art and culture. During the war, they participated in underground meetings where they discussed their ideas about art, exchanged books, and organized lectures and exhibits of their recent works in private apartments and in basements. By so doing, not only were they developing as artists and theorists, but also sustaining the continuity of artistic structures no longer visible. The bonds formed between them survived for many years. They were of great significance to Polish art in the post-war period, since, as Professor Porębski asserted, "when the war [World War II] ended, we knew that we had lost this war." In 1946, they founded the Group of Young Visual Artists and, in 1948, organized the Exhibition of Modern Art that showcased leading artists from all over Poland. Immediately following these activities, in the period of socialist realism, the majority of these artists found themselves in an artistic underground once again. In post-war Poland, it was known that the most important European avant-gardes (Constructivism, Surrealism, Abstract Art) had already died in the West. It was, however, believed that their historical traces must have survived and still functioned under different guises. This is the reason why the group assumed the all-too-ambiguous name of "modernists," a name which would allow them to find a way out from beneath the war's destruction and debris, but also enable them to safeguard their artistic creativity from the appropriations of ideologues and academics. Kantor, while continuously maneuvering between external forces and influences, was passionately committed to such an understanding of modernism. Some believed he was the leader of the Polish avant-garde. He belonged to that category of artists who refused to accept mediocrity, to exist in isolation, or to be guided by false criteria. The act of creating "events" was as important to him as painting pictures. Engaged in both activities, he demanded high standards for himself and his environment.

"One must not ride the wave, one must be the wave," Kantor often repeated in the 1950s, when I met him for the first time. He would repeat these words to make his young adepts aware that they ought not to copy thoughtlessly Western artistic trends, that they ought to be aware of what was happening around them, and what had always preoccupied the minds of human beings and artists. He emphasized that art was a continuous series of changes and, as was the case with life, must develop and challenge existing conventions and norms. He devoted himself to learning about new artistic trends around the world. He learned by travelling first to France and then to other countries. Upon his return to Poland, he brought with him information about the work of such artists as, for example, Fautrier, Wols, or Mathieu (French "L'art informel"); Jackson Pollock ("action painting"); Antoni Tàpies (paintings of matter); and others: Yves Klein, Allan Kaprow, Joseph Beuys. He brought information about the impact of Surrealism and of Marcel Duchamp on modern art, about new artistic groups such as Group "Zero" and the Japanese group "Gutai," about minimal art and happenings. He shared his newly-acquired knowledge with others through public lectures, writing and publishing articles, distributing artistic journals he had brought with him from the West. He was also a popular teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts, or, at least, he was when he could, for twice the authorities stripped him of his professorship, because he did not follow the official curriculum. He actively participated in the artistic life of Poland: he helped to reactivate the prewar Kraków Group (1957), took active part in establishing new galleries of contemporary art such as Galeria Krzysztofory in Kraków (1958) and Galeria Foksal in Warszawa (1966). These activities notwithstanding, one must not see Kantor as a promoter of avant-garde or modern art; rather, he channelled information about these movements so as to animate discussion and destabilize current thought regarding particular artistic trends.

When the information about art became more accessible and its dissemination less restricted, Kantor revised his essential beliefs about the avant-garde. In "Manifesto 70," and later in "The Twelfth Milano Lesson," he vehemently warned about and spoke against "All-Powerful Consumption," "All-Powerful Communication," "All-Powerful Holy Technology." This did not mean that Kantor abandoned the avant-garde. While he harshly criticized prevailing practices, he introduced new ideas and methods into his own art by drawing attention to an individual and new artistic sensibility. His theatre pieces, theoretical writings, and paintings were devoted to this exploration. Kantor's passion for writing commentaries about art and his own artistic endeavours was not the passion of an explorer. It was not his instinct to acquire knowledge about art solely for the sake of learning. Rather, as Kantor poignantly observed in his writings and art, it was the "matter of life" that was the inexhaustible source of events and inspiration. When this "matter" is scientifically or methodically treated, however, the outcome is nothing but chaos. Consequently, one needs to find a different way of approaching the "matter of life." A work of art creates such a possibility. During the creative process, artists find themselves in a

neverending crisis, which Kantor calls the condition of an artist. The individual world of an artist, including that of the work of art, is, according to Kantor, closer to the truth when created out of the shreds and remnants of reality (the objects of the lowest rank) or of memory (childhood and old age, two stages of life and intense moments of creativity). Kantor would also praise coincidence, which has little value within a traditional and rational way of thinking. This is why Kantor was interested in Informel Art [*L'art informel*], in which the form of a painting ceases to be binding and makes its master strokes on the canvas. In destruction and negation, Kantor saw unlimited possibilities for the artistic process. Both opened up a space of intellect, humour, and comic principles. Jan Kott labelled Kantor's theatre pieces as "tragifarces" and compared them to Beckett's. He noted that "even though the images they created are different, it is impossible not to compare these two theatres of birth/life and death of the end of the twentieth century."

In order to describe his encounters with art, people, and objects, Kantor preferred to use the term "meeting" or "encounter" rather than "process of learning." He would say "my meetings with a human being," "my meetings with a painting," "my meetings with an object." A sudden encounter with somebody or something, an unexpected meeting with something that moves at its own speed, or an unforeseen crash into something contained, as Kantor explained, had a higher emotional potential and authenticity and remained longer in memory. The term "meeting," or rather Kantor's theory of meetings, gives us a clear insight into his relationship with the world and explains his creative process better than any systematic or meticulous description of this relationship or process. Thus, there were "My Meeting with Velázquez ("Infanta Margarita Came into My Room")," "My Meetings with Meyerhold," "My Meeting with a Homeless," "My Meeting with Dürer's *Rhinoceros*," and "My Meetings with Death." That which he met, rather than that which he hoped to find, was important to him and left a permanent trace. Some meetings were more important than others. For example, the meeting with Witkacy [Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz], a painter, a playwright, and a novelist, who committed suicide in 1939, was one of these important meetings. It is probable that Kantor met Witkacy while a student in Kraków, but that meeting was not yet important at the time. Maybe it happened too early. Only after World War II did Kantor meet Witkacy and Witkacy's plays once again. Kantor chose *The Cuttlefish* to inaugurate the Cricot 2 in 1956. For the next twenty years, Kantor staged other plays by Witkacy and only plays by Witkacy. Kantor, however, would never say: "I play Witkacy," but rather: "I play with Witkacy." This statement was accurate, because Kantor in his theatre never represented the narrative action or plot, since the text functioned only as "the introduction to action." The text was like an object on stage; an object that was autonomous and important. Today, Witkacy is known world-wide and his plays have been translated into many languages. In the 1950s, however, Witkacy plays were banned in Poland. He was believed to be a prophet of doom of the contemporary world. Kantor was inspired not so much by the form or the

meaning of Witkacy's plays, but, as he often remarked, by Witkiewicz's intelligence and sense of humour; a sense of humour that many avant-garde artists, the Constructivists for example, lacked. Kantor admired Witkacy's skepticism and his desire to disintegrate and challenge the norm. That is why he came back to Witkacy many times while working on the *Theatre of Death*. He observed that "if one says destruction; if one says disintegration, one needs to say yet another word. Before I said it, I needed to work on the *Zero Theatre* and the idea of Nothingness. But finally I did say this banal word: 'Death.' Later I added to it: 'Past and Memory,' words that had been forgotten in the arts and believed to be out of place." Another significant meeting was that with the second of the three Prophets of Polish literature between the wars: Bruno Schulz. In Schulz's writings, Kantor discovered the "world of mannequins" and "degraded reality," both of which had a definite meaning for Kantor. The third meeting was with Witold Gombrowicz, who had praised the condition of "adolescence." These three meetings exerted an impact on the shaping of the *Theatre of Death*. In the first production, *The Dead Class*, the stage, that is, a classroom, was populated by the people-mannequins of the dead pupils and by the Old People who returned to their childhood. The true participants in this production, however, were Witkacy, Schulz, and Gombrowicz, whose names appeared the Program.

Kantor was faithful to that which he encountered unconsciously or by accident on his way. This faith was a commitment to things that exist in real life rather than in art. Kantor's faith was not a dedication to style or form but an impulse for his imagination.

During his artistic journey, Kantor tried to discover signs that were different from those which "unequivocally" rationalized the arts and provided indisputable definitions. He continued to travel, even though he was reminded at every crossroad that "further on, [there is] nothing." He created works that were internationally renown. He was not sure, however, how durable they were. They were constructed masterfully. Kantor built not only their form but also their own reality and realness. Form and life were balanced carefully on the threshold between two worlds approaching one another, between known and unknown, between illusion and reality, between his Home and the world, between Life and Death. Impermanence and frailty, or the condition of "everything hanging by a thread," were a part of their construction. Kantor would say that the statement "one more step and everything will fall into pieces" was closer to a truth than "one more step and everything will regain its balance." The very moment and point of going over the threshold or approaching it or of crossing it "illegally" were not marked in Kantor's works by pathos or heightened symbolism, but by everyday and banal objects, for example, the doors or a window he had placed on stage. He did so as if to suggest that by standing by the doors and waiting, one may hope that one more meeting could take place or one more mystery could be revealed once the doors were opened.

Making his revisions to Dada and his own art, the so-called "revisions of the end of the twentieth century," Kantor noted: "A feeling of death, which was the

mark of the war and a premonition of my THEATRE OF DEATH thirty years later, covered my attitude and that time with the veil of metaphysics that was alien to the spirit of DADA. The concept of POORNESS, which was fully explored in my IDEA OF REALITY OF THE LOWEST RANK, contained in itself a dose of LYRICAL tone and (heaven forbid!) EMOTIONS, which were foreign to Dada." The differences in the process of creating art and its reception, even through the juxtaposition of two distinct epochs marked by thunderous changes, are not as insurmountable as current aesthetic theory would want us to believe. Tadeusz Kantor's meetings with the artistic trends, people, and objects in the space of the twentieth century has showed us the way.

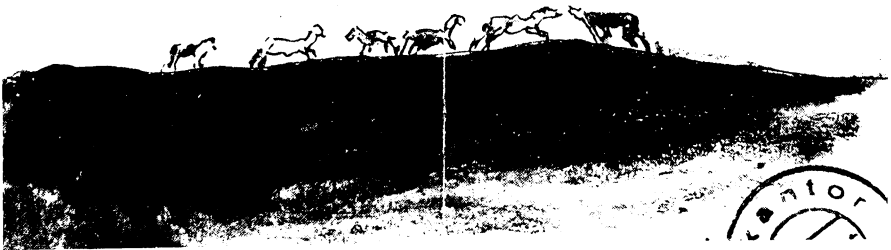


Fig. 15 Tadeusz Kantor's drawing: *Untitled*. Courtesy of Mark Vayssiére.