

Homage to Tadeusz Kantor: Introduction

Michał Kobialka

One needs only to press one's ear against the walls to hear the weak voice of one's own desires, fears, and presentiments—the voice of one's own meanings and predestinations. . . . You only need to press the ear against the wall. . . .

Andrzej Welmiński

Tadeusz Kantor, a Polish visual artist, theatre director, founder of the Cricot 2 Company, and a theoretician of theatre, died on December 8, 1990. As was the case in the past four years, on December 8, there will be different events commemorating Kantor at the Cricoteka Archives in Kraków, Poland. Away from home, with this section of *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, I would like to pay homage to Tadeusz Kantor, an artist who taught many of us not only to challenge but also to tear down the boundaries of traditional and nontraditional theatre forms. While putting this section together, I invited theatre practitioners and scholars to contribute essays, testimonies, or other materials about Kantor or Kantor's theatre that would destabilize the contours of that which begins to emerge as "Tadeusz Kantor." By keeping the parameters of these essays as open as possible, I wished to present a collection that will bring a vivid image of Kantor and his ephemeral theatre closer to English-speaking audiences. The reader should not therefore be surprised by differences in format or tone used by the authors of the pieces. Some of the essays are personal recollections of the funeral, other essays discuss Kantor's artistic endeavours, still others examine some key aspects of Kantor's theatre. All of them, however, are a painful reminder that the person who generated all this creative energy is no longer with us. "The waves separate me from their voices. The waves separate me from a boat of the dead. Wait! Stop! Stand Still!"¹ This encounter can happen within the space referred to by Kantor as some secret "river crossing," which reveals "*the traces of transition from 'that other side' into our life.*"² Even though Kantor and we belong to different dimensions, this section may create a possibility for all of us to function "as if past and future ceased to exist. [. . .] Everything is intertwined, one could say: everything exists simultaneously."³ The essays grouped here evoke multiple memories of Kantor's statements about Life, Death, Memory, Room of Imagination, and Theatre. Kantor, who even when alive, like a ghost hovered around the stage, allows us to see ourselves in his exteriority and to reexamine our own thoughts about Life, Death, Memory, History, and Theatre.

Death: Kantor often spoke about death. In one of his essays, "My Meetings with Death," he talks about different images of Death that accompanied him in life and in art ever since he was six years old: the image of the ice cold face of the old priest lying on a wooden cart, the image of his own funeral procession that appeared in his fever-driven imagination when he was sick as a child, the image of the figure standing behind the soldiers during the war, or the image of a coffin on which the artist, his two dead wives, the tyrant, and Pope Julius II sat to discuss the art in *The Cuttlefish* (1956).

. . . Ever since that time, she regularly showed up on stage to perform her 'parts.'

She would show up more and more often.

Tragic Death—she would elevate her wretched remnants onto the plane of pathos.

Mocking Death—she would scorn everything that was mediocre and banal with her clownish laughter.

Slowly, she had become my "partner."

She guided me through her steep and dangerous roads.

Her face was beautiful, still like a stone, and silent like eternity.

She stood quietly backstage
sure of her charm and allure. . . .

I watched mesmerized
how, on stage, life in some kind of
maddening,
indignant,
and magnificent
disintegration of its everyday
was shamelessly disclosing
its T R U T H
that had been hidden at the bottom. . . .

But it was HER truth,

Magnificent,

Difficult to bear,

seen through tears, tears of grief, of euphoria,
and through LAUGHTER!⁴

To paraphrase Kantor, it was his truth, magnificent and difficult to bear, that was prominently displayed for us in *The Dead Class* (1975), *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), *Let the Artists Die* (1985), *I Shall Never Return* (1988), and *Today Is My Birthday* (1990/91), that is, in his theatre of personal confessions.⁵ Now, five years after his death, the actors who used to physicalize and verbalize Kantor's intimate understanding of the abstract future in the present moment, talk about their encounter with death. It is a different meeting from the one described by

Kantor, but its difference speaks the language of a full realization of a trace left in them by Kantor and of his cruel bodily absence and a gap created by it that will always force us to speak "to th'yet unknowing world/How these things came about." Luigi Arpini recalls the moment when the actors walked with the casket on their shoulders; a moment reminiscent of the final scene of *Today Is My Birthday* that they had just finished rehearsing. "Same scene, same place; the real and the imaginary blur together. We gravitate like little planets around Memory, imprisoned . . . and vitalized by its enormous force of attraction. Past and future: memory as a single body: on one side presenting us the future, on the other the past, depending on from where one is looking." Loriano Della Rocca describes his farewell to Kantor and his encounter with "an empty cadaver" in the morgue: "I see Tadeusz there, before us, but it is not he. Perhaps he has gone somewhere else—inside us, above us, perhaps to heaven (if there were such a place!), but here displayed before us, is nothing but an empty body." Waclaw Janicki's diary entries, which give us a unique insight into the rehearsal process of *Today Is My Birthday*, end with a painfully short statement: "Kantor is dead. As I kept this diary, it never occurred to me that I would ever write this short and tragic sentence."

* * *

Memory: in 1980 essay, "The Room. Maybe a New Phase," Kantor observed that,

It is difficult to define the spatial dimension of memory.
 Here, this is a room of my childhood
 with all its inhabitants.
 This is the room which I keep reconstructing over and over again
 and which is destroyed over and over again.
 Its inhabitants are the members of my family. [. . .]
 These DEAD FACADES
 come to life, become real and important
 through this stubborn REPETITION OF ACTION.
 Maybe this stubborn repetition of action,
 this pulsating rhythm
 which lasts for life;
 which ends in n o t h i n g n e s s;
 which is futile;
 is an inherent part of MEMORY. . . .
 There is also a place "BEHIND THE DOORS,"
 a place which is somewhere at the back of the ROOM;
 a DIFFERENT space;
 —an open interior of our imagination—
 which exists in a different dimension.

This is where the threads of our memory are woven;
 where our freedom is born. . . .
 We are standing at the door giving a long farewell to our childhood;
 we are standing helpless
 at the threshold of eternity and death.
 In front of us,
 in this poor and dusky room,
 behind the doors,
 a storm and an inferno rage,
 and the waters of the flood rise.
 The weak walls of our ROOM;
 of our everyday or
 linear time
 will not save us. . . .
 Important events stand behind the doors
 it is enough to open them. . . .⁶

The memory of Kantor lives, because we perpetuate the images that we recall from our store-room of memory. Though simulated, these images still have a corporeal presence, because like the watchman in *The Oresteia*, we, the witnesses, want to believe that there is value in our need to speak so the trace will materialize one more time before it disappears into oblivion with our disappearance. Piotr Nawrocki's memory is an invitation to a dance macabre: "Let's go together into our old, run-down classroom to dance the tango and laugh. One more time. . . . Although we have gotten old, very old and very tired." So is Brunella Eruli's "Wielopole on Arno—Tango." Eruli remembers the day of Kantor's arrival in Florence to work on *Wielopole, Wielopole*. Her description of that November day in 1979 brings to mind Artaud's references to the plague and the theatre. In "Theatre and the Plague," Artaud observes that "St. Augustine points to the similarity of the plague which kills without destroying any organs and theatre which without killing, induces the most mysterious changes not only in the minds of individuals but in a whole nation."⁷ Thus, recalls Eruli: "When I arrived at St. Maria, I saw a thin man, not very tall, dressed in black, with a velvet beret pulled over his eyes and an incredibly long scarf wrapped around his neck. [. . .] A group of young people [. . .] was keeping an eye on a truck smashed, rather than parked, against the pavement of a very narrow lane. [. . .] The truck was regurgitating large crates on which were written incomprehensible words. The church door stood ajar, but the crates remained in the street. [. . .] The man from dark Kraków brought with him the other face of the Renaissance: contortions and pains of an apocalyptic inferno. That was the content of the crates. And maybe because of what was in the crates, there seemed to be no place for these people and for their apocalyptic inferno within the church, built in sandstone, washed in lime, whose golden dimensions ignored history and its horrors." Franca Silvestri's account of her memories of Kantor's work with the

actors in the period from 1984 until 1989 ends with Pompeii's image of petrified bodies congealed in the last moment of life, a metaphor for the final scene of *Today Is My Birthday*. Marie Vayssière, who in *I Shall Never Return* was seated face to face with Kantor during the long scene in the Inn of Memory, writes about her memory of Kantor's face and what it revealed about life and theatre: "I wish to do nothing more than report and share, no doubt incompletely and very clumsily, a still-confused sentiment that is composed of strong impressions, of rare emotions, and that will have absolutely no historical value." That which was revealed is also communicated by Heinz Neidel who observed in his epitaph that Kantor "showed us that there is no way out, only a way. He showed us where we could go, if only we wanted. [. . .] Life without his signposts is a life where we are all on our own again." We are like travellers sitting in a station that is no longer in service. "And yet this tired wanderer [. . .] against all odds is waiting for a train to arrive and to stop. Within the first hour a freight train and an express train thunder past."

* * *

Memory:

When a human being and a work of art cease to exist,
memory,

a record sent into the future
into the next generation,
remains. [. . .]

The Archive—

Alive—[is]

Neither a library collection,
nor a collection of old and dead costumes,
nor dead props,
nor consecrated relics,
nor nostalgic albums,
nor dry memorabilia,
as is often the case,
but a collection of

I D E A S that were born in opposition to all that is,
in protest against the stultification of the values
exhibited on the stages
around the world.⁸

The memory as the living archive is the subject matter of the essays written by a director of Cricoteka Archives, Krzysztof Pleśniarowicz, an art historian and an ex-Cricot 2 actor, Lech Stangret, Kantor's French translator, Marie-Thérèse Vidorzewuska, and a long associate as well as critic, Wiesław Borowski. Pleśniarowicz recalls his interviews with Kantor in which Kantor, "the last truly

great avant-garde artist of the end of the twentieth century," insisted on the need to rebel against received conventions, institutions, authorities, and oneself. This act of rebellion would lead to revisions of the accepted avant-garde movements and, consequently, save a work of art from being immobilized, rigidified, or fixed. "I believe," Kantor said, "that the existence of contradictory attitudes and characters is very important to the work of art. This is my opinion, my own. This is the driving force of art, but also a necessity. Otherwise, it would be impossible to create anything." The idea of contradiction, as Pleśniarowicz contends, was not only grounded in Kantor's explorations of the contradiction between symbolism and abstract art, but also in historical circumstances. He brings to our attention Kantor's work on *Unworthy and Worthy*, a catastrophic morality play by a Polish avant-garde poet, Józef Chechowicz. The information concerning the staging of the play is scanty. Kantor's own statements regarding the use of the commedia dell'arte convention in the staging of the play are invaluable as they explain both his understanding of "the century of the Golgotha of the Peoples, and of totalitarianisms that crushed the individual" and his use of revised avant-garde conventions in order to reveal the aspects of the play thus far hidden by the dominant representational practice. This desire to prevent the process of stabilizing the thinking processes about the work of art is the theme of Stangret's essay. Stangret, who joined the Cricot 2 Company in 1979, discusses Kantor's concept of artistic theatre. Noteworthy here are Kantor's letter-manifesto, "Artistic Conditions for the Participation of Actors in the Florentine Program of the Cricot 2 Theatre," and Kantor's little-known notes on Claes Oldenberg's happening. The letter-manifesto and Kantor's familiarity with contemporary art and art criticism explain some of the passages in Kantor's *Milano Lessons* where he insists that "one must embrace art to understand the essence of theatre. [. . .] Paradoxically, if we succeed, our success will be the result of our ability to embrace and comprehend A L L M O D E R N A R T and its ideas, themes, and conflicts."⁹ They will shed some light on Kantor's understanding of the function of the creative process during the rehearsals on a new production as well as on the importance he attached to the need for the actors to be familiar with and participate in contemporary art. Vido-Rzewuska draws our attention to yet another piece from our store-room of memory of Kantor's memories—the blurred image of Kantor's absent father. She suggests that Kantor changed his attitude towards his father after having attended an official meeting dedicated to the memory of Marian Kantor-Mirski on June 2, 1984. According to Vido-Rzewuska, this transformation can be traced in the 1988 production of *I Shall Never Return* and the 1990/91 production of *Today Is My Birthday* where Kantor's father is presented in a more favourable light than, for example, in the 1980 production of *Wielopole, Wielopole*. As she argues "from childhood to adulthood, the identity of the father—fragmentary, confused, and uncertain—became part of Kantor's quest, with his constant questioning about his place in the memory of a human being, about his place in a culture linked to the birth of 'Europe' in the middle of a humanist yet barbaric century."

This constant questioning is evident in Borowski's essay which traces Kantor's attitude towards the artistic trends in the twentieth century. Borowski describes Kantor's theatre experiments during World War II and in post-war Poland as well as discusses Kantor's participation in the artistic life in his native country. He emphasizes the shifts and transformations, or to use Kantor's phrase, the revisions made by Kantor because of the so-called encounters between life and art. "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." Nothing encapsulates this better, Borowski argues, than Kantor's meeting with Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Bruno Schulz, and Witold Gombrowicz in the classroom and the reality of *The Dead Class*.

* * *

Café Europa:

The widespread attitude to divide Europe into
 East and West seems to be extremely naive.
 Europe is indivisible. The Europe of c u l t u r e. [. . .]
 There is but one Europe!
 There, at the crossroads of Time,
 there has to exist a "Café Europa" . . .
 There are already so many people there. . . .¹⁰

Daniel Gerould, using *The Dead Class*, *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*, and *Let the Artists Die*, illustrates the quintessence of Kantor's iconography. As Gerould asserts, even though Kantor's sources are individual and self-perpetuating, there are certain images that he had accumulated in memory. Well-known are Kantor's references to historical and international omnipresent avant gardes, that is, to Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, Marcel Duchamp, Oskar Schlemmer or Dada, Constructivism, Surrealism, and the Bauhaus, for example. Gerould, however, focuses on Kantor as a Kraków artist drawing upon the city's unusual modernist-symbolist movement. To substantiate his point, Gerould discusses the works of

such painters as Jacek Malczewski, Edward Okuń, and Stanisław Wyspiański whose imagery was reborn in Kantor's theatre as these three productions testify. Georges Banu shows how Kantor, who frequently called upon Duchamp, constructivism, Dada, and the Happenings, used the avant garde to realign his own past and that of the avant gardes. Using *The Dead Class*, which he perceives as "a concise counterpart to [Proust's] *Remembrance of Things Past*," Banu suggests that Kantor created what could be described as "the Noh of the lowest rank." "The universe of [Kantor's] *Theatre of Death* displayed the same fracture of temporality as the universe of the Noh theatre, both animated by the 'man in the corner.'" Despite differences in the function of a *waki* and Kantor on stage, the kinship between the two narrative structures "posits the encounter of a solitary artist with an age-old tradition. For both [. . .], theatre is 'the place of a secret passage, the ford between the hereafter and the world of the living.'" These aspects of Kantor's theatre that seem to blur the boundaries between "the East and the West" are also brought to the fore by Jan Kłossowicz's discussion of Kantor's paradoxes, which may be an integral part of the "genetic code of theatre": Kantor's idea of theatre based on contradictions where oppositions never lead to conclusion, his presence on stage, which Kantor defined as "illegal," and Kantor's formula of "emotive constructivism," a construction used to play with spectator's emotions. In the introduction to his poems to the memory of Kantor, Bolesław Taborski adds two more paradoxes. "The first paradox was that [Kantor] propped his productions with theoretical manifestos calling them a theatre of death, whereas in fact it was a theatre of life. [. . .] The second paradox was that Kantor appeared to be the most self-centred man one could imagine. [. . .] But [his] vision implied immense compassion and understanding for others."

* * *

Room of Imagination:

[. . .] darkness
 has veiled everything around and above me.
 But, even in this darkness
 I keep building my walls, my windows, and my doors
 Anew
 In the growing space of my imagination—
 But only in the space of my imagination,
 and in my solitude.
 What perseverance!!!
 The chimney stands still—
 a dead carcass of a house! . . .
 It is getting dark.
 It is probably the time to close

the doors of my Poor Room of Imagination.¹¹

Ugo Volli and Spencer Golub, each in his own way, talk about Kantor's room of imagination before its doors were closed. Volli posits that Kantor established a new theory of theatre that defined this art *par excellence* of the "real presence" and exteriority not in terms of a traditional act of imitation or reproduction of a possible world, but in terms of an act of memory able to summon the personal images of an artist and to present them to the audience. By so doing, Kantor did not intend to re-create his memory as a reality during a performance. Rather, his memory was always nothing more than an image, or, more precisely, "a dead and fragile ghost." "With Baudrillard and Lyotard we learned to imagine the exteriority of the world as a seductive surface, which captures us in a fake world of simulacrum. Although this may be true, exteriority is also what betrays us by placing us outside, leaving our traces in the world, and reducing us to the insignificant stereotypical expressions. Kantor dared speak to us about the dangers of exteriority at the very moment he defended his memory and constructed the significance of his images. He was capable of understanding his interiority as exteriority and revealing this to us." The interplay between exteriority and interiority comes to focus with Golub's opening image of Kantor's gravesite adorned with a sculpture of a "dead-class" schoolboy resembling Kantor seated at a wooden writing desk and the closing image of Blanchot's "forgetting" that necessitates the neutrality and the fading of the world. By bringing to our attention "the opaque resistance of things and the subjectivity of thought," Golub traces the material representation of a (no)body "in order to see the unseen in a stopped time that eludes life and approximates death." In this fading of the world provoking "forgetfulness in the midst of memory," there are only remanences of "time-scarred *objets trouvés*," a writing desk, memory, "un-scene," and unseen as his reading of Jan Švankmajer's 1988 film *Alice*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Andrey Tarkovsky's 1975 film *Mirror*, and Anatoly Efros's 1981 production of *Tartuffe* suggest. Once their materiality is extinguished, they will fall into a trap, a hole, or a grave, thus, into "space and time below the ground where the corpse, the statue's original, [is] decomposing." On the other hand, maybe, this unseen/un-scene, or to use Michel Foucault's term "remanence," is the very emballage that protects the corpse both from trespassing or being forgotten: "Human flesh is but/a fragile and poetic/Emballage of/the skeleton, of death,/and of hope that it will last/until Doomsday."¹² "Time and space recur. 'Only we are missing.'"

The moment these words are uttered, one is tempted to anchor herself or himself to the surface permanence of an image, a memory trace, out of a timeless and spaceless odyssey to hear the weak voice of desires, fears, and confusions; it is an image which "curves upon itself, illuminates its own plenitude, brings its circle to completion, recognizes itself in all the strange figures of its Odyssey, and accepts its disappearance into the same ocean from which it sprang."¹³

* * *

This collection of essays would be incomplete without the visual testimonies of the artists paying homage to Kantor, the visual artist. Maria Stangret-Kantor's "Homage to Kantor," Jackie Bablet's photographs, Kantor's drawings selected from the Anna Halczak collection, and Robert Wilson's "Homage to Kantor" speak for themselves.

* * *

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Notes

1. Tadeusz Kantor, "Program Notes to *I Shall Never Return*" (Milano: Cappelletti and Riscassi s.r.l., 1988), n.p.
2. Kantor, "The Infamous Transition," *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944-1990*, edited and translated by Michal Kobialka (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1993) 146.
3. Kantor, "Notes to a Film Script, *Powrót Odysa*" (Unpublished ms., 1990) 5.
4. Kantor, "My Meetings with Death," *Performing Arts Journal* 47 (May 1994): 41-2.
5. Kantor, "To Save from Oblivion," *A Journey* 166-71.
6. Kantor, "A Room. Maybe a New Phase," *A Journey* 142-3.
7. Antonin Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double* (London: John Calder, 1977) 17.
8. Tadeusz Kantor, "Memory," *Performing Arts Journal*: 23-4.
9. Kantor, *A Journey* 209.
10. Kantor, "Café Europa" (Kraków: Cricoteka Archives, n.d.), n.p.
11. Kantor, *Performing Arts Journal*: 38.
12. Kantor, *A Journey* 28.
13. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1973) 334.

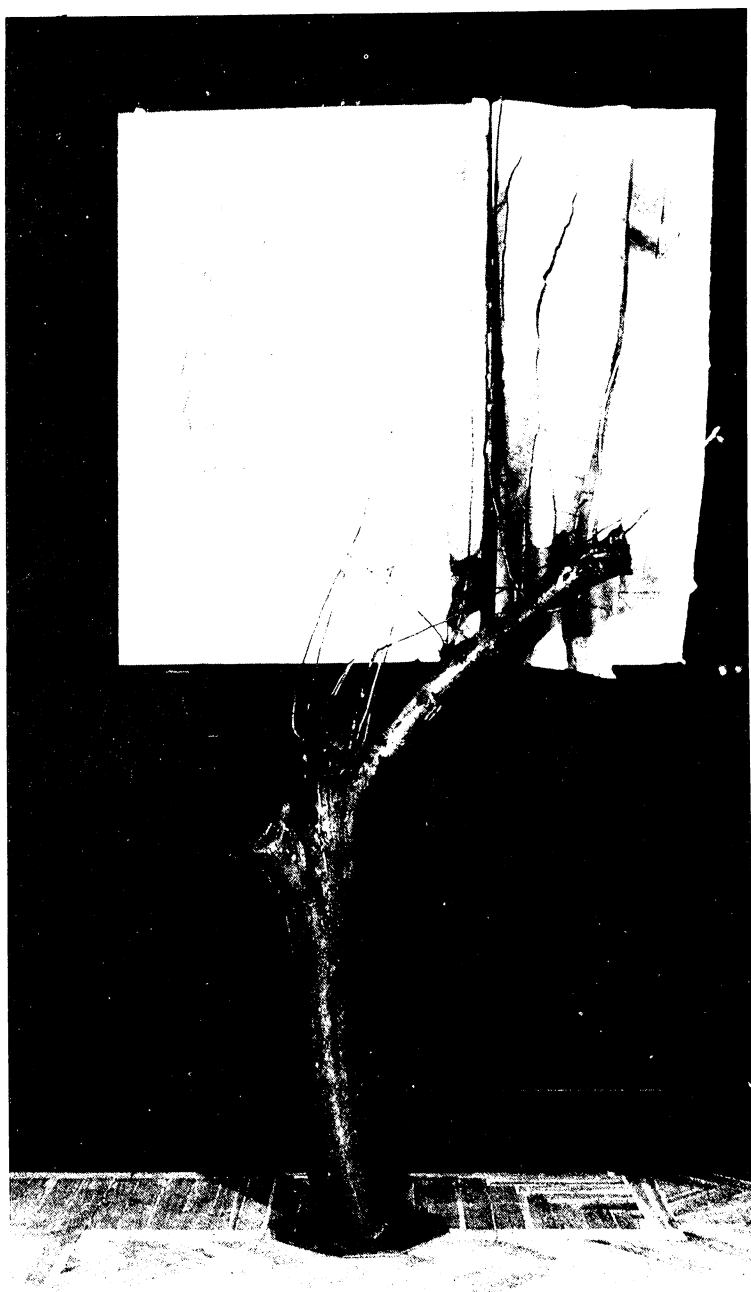


Fig. 1. Maria Stangret-Kantor: *Hommage à Tadeusz Kantor* (1992).



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