

Tadeusz Kantor's Circus

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Memory and memory of the future—the encounter between memory and the prediction of what is to come. Inexplicable contractions in time: becoming is already a universal memory, and our stories are part of it. The example of Tadeusz Kantor's last show *Today Is My Birthday*. Kantor puts on stage his room, his life, his memories, the present and the future—everything is superimposed. The last scene, which he rehearsed with us the day before his death, is that of a funeral—his funeral. He had been in excellent health. He directed us on the set in the THEATRE; we advanced slowly in two rows holding aloft the symbolic coffin—his coffin—to the melody of Beethoven's *Eroica*. All around us were crosses, gravediggers, ghosts of yesterday, monsters of our epoch—everything was disintegrating. The rehearsal left off at this extreme point . . . on the border. The next day, Kantor died. A week later was his funeral. We, the actors, walked with the casket on our shoulders. 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. It is this movement of ours from side to side that provokes the vortex of past and future: everything becomes present, instant, and real—it is the PRESENT. We do not perceive this reality, except perhaps in some extraordinary instant in our lives.

The pulsation. The passage from a vision of detail, a microscopic vision, to a vision suddenly from a great distance, as if through a telescope. The characters free themselves, break from the actions that occupy them, and merge into a single circular action, creating a roundabout of masks, as if to disassociate themselves from their role and show it to the audience for what it is, pitiful and nostalgic, a degenerate and compassionate clown. In this circular *defilé*, the characters enter an object-like state, almost marionettes, parading as if on strings, just to be shown off, each pushed by some force, yet inanimate, a parade of the dead. From this great distance, we can see the Human Being in its eternal path. It may seem a childish ring-around-the-rosy, an arrhythmia in which the Apollonian is recreated as a neverending world of childhood. The circular parade stops, and the incessant action resumes. Kantor knows perfectly how to use this action which he is able to free when he introduces sound into the kinetic material of the scenic action. A continuous erotic motion of the spirit is produced. With the tuning of his theatrical mechanism, Kantor invented his "emotion machine."

It is through this suggestion in the form of pulsation-movement that emotion is produced in the spectator. "Emotional constructivism," Kantor says. It has nothing to do with intellectual comprehension. Nostalgia, mercy, a new-found time that struggles against the longing of an absolutely irretrievable time. We assist a theatre act of the memory and yet provoke a vertigo of memory and time itself. Everything advances like a disintegration, a disappearance. Kantor's creative and destructive act remains the act of synthesis of a story we could call a "layman's bible." Thus, every performance is a rhythmically-executed universality narrated with his brilliant use of all that material born through a Genesis, nourished and proliferating in the zone of perception, and finally scattered in an apocalyptic "big bang." At the end of each performance, the work disintegrates, the content disintegrates, the initial form, evoked and materialized by memory's "time," disintegrates. Apocalypse: everything returns to its primeval chaos. We know that APOCALYPSE means revelation. Doubtless, Kantor lets us witness a revelation.

Kraków. November 1990.

Regardless of years I have spent and continue to spend in the Kantorian universe, I try to find a critical distance to be able to write "an event," a purely theatrical event, about the characters and people that live in the theatre of Tadeusz Kantor. Not so much about Kantor's theatre, but rather that theatrical form which Kantor makes visible in his drawings, always already marked and impregnated with vitality and action, with the real and the illusionary. For me, these drawings present the most potent aspects of his visions. Today, when the drawings are transformed, coming to life through the gestures of the actors, I sense that the drawings are emptied out of their power. In his repeated manipulations, Kantor has inflated them to the point of degradation, thus, when shown on stage, they can longer speak, no longer communicate. The characters are truly dead. Kantor himself returned them, after draining them like a vampire, to the death that he crafted in every performance. For me, Kantor's characters remain terribly alive in the drawings (not the paintings). His drawings acquire and maintain a constant vitality, a continuous proliferation of pure and inextinguishable dramatic action. His drawings are the photographs of the culminating moment, and in this state of purity, they are poised at the threshold. In this im-mobility, they become the great death; death as a temporary connection: the moment, the passage between two worlds. On stage, they are the tireless instruments of the voyage.

Saturday, December 8, 1990.

Today, Kraków is different than it was on other days. Today, Kraków is different than it was the first time, different than it was all the other times. A dream, a lightness, a non-violent stupor of all that lives around me and all that lives unknown. A kind of pause to recall something old and to see the forms of the new. Today is December 8, 1990. This morning at five our Tadeusz Kantor has died. A heart attack without much suffering. I have been to the morgue. He seemed to be made of wax; he was one of his mannequins. In order to avoid

the mystery and reality, I still think of him as alive. It is three thirty the afternoon, and I find myself at the Krzysztofory [Gallery]. Kantor created many of his works in the basement. My sentiments are opaque; I feel an emptiness, a grief, and a liberation. May he rest in peace.

December 14. The funeral.

A real funeral. It has been a long time since I have been in a funeral. The funeral took all morning. That bread and butter from last night at Ludka's [Ludka Ryba, one of the Cricot 2 actresses] has curdled in my stomach. I slept little, almost not at all. Many times during the night, I looked at the clock. Agitation came and went. The alarm was set for half past seven. The alarm clock rang, and I got up. I would have liked to stay in bed longer. The mere thought of shaving weighed heavily upon me. I went out. A cold December morning. The wake was held at the Cricoteka. We waited for the funeral carriage. The little group that had gathered on Kanonicza Street became, with every passing minute, larger and larger, a crowd of people—friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and strangers—who had come from all over the world to give their last good-byes to Tadeusz. Many hardened faces, desperate glances; many wept, others were in an empty, sad stupor. The casket is slid onto the freshly repainted black carriage. A shiver goes through me when the band strikes the first notes. The hooves of the white horses with red plumes strike nervously on the stones. We are moving. I find myself next to Lila Krasicka [a Cricot 2 actress] and offer her my arm. I know from her breathing that she is already tired. How long ago, I think . . . do you remember, Lila, it was ten years ago, that cold rainy morning in Paris when we went to Père Lachaise and stood at Chopin's tomb? I held the umbrella. You said some words to Chopin as if to a lost son, leaning on the tombstone. I do not remember the words, but they moved me. It was a desperate, senseless affirmation and you, Lila, had slipped away into an abyss or a distant place; you had truly gone to visit Chopin. That voice intrigued me, but I stayed silent when I saw your eyes of blue wax and the wrinkles on your immobile face. Only your tears moved. . . .

The funeral procession paused a moment in a city square. That day, from a tiny window of St. Mary's cathedral, a speck up in the tower spire, the trumpeter sounded the "interrupted motif" twice. In that moment, the square was in the hands of the angels. The road was long. Lila said goodbye and went in a car with some friends. At the cemetery, after mass, the speeches began. Many speeches. Everybody talked. A long sermon from the priest. I listened, I tried to get what he was saying, but I could not understand a word. An endless amount of time passed. We stood numbed above the open grave and under the falling snow. Some people cried, some hugged themselves in their coats and looked at the ground. It was a great communion of people, of their lives, in time that evades, in a moment of love and solitude. The snow continued to fall. There is never a silence so vast as when snow is falling. The voices disappeared upwards. At the gravesite, a pupil from *The Dead Class* sits at his writing desk which brings him back to life, or so it seems to me; youth, affectionate

immortality. His eyes look at the world with a purity that seems to have just descended into life: God's mannequin and, next to him, in that empty space, a cross. There was a feeling of peace. [. . .] At the end of the ceremony, we dispersed. Some went to the main gate. Some lingered, others disappeared down the paths to other gates. It kept snowing.

Café Starego. Eighteen Hours.

This long day is over. The time I passed in Kraków is over. The rehearsals for the new productions are over. Kantor is no more. Many things have ended. I do not know what to do next. I have to pack my suitcases.

Note

1. Excerpts from "Notebooks," *Travels and Theatre with Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot 2*.

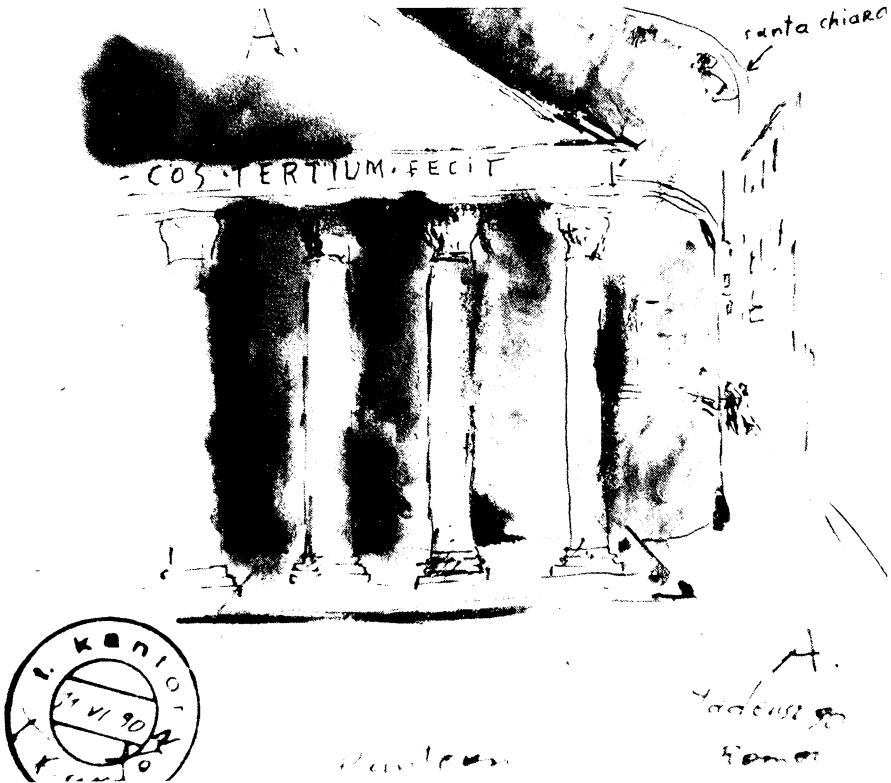


Fig. 3. Tadeusz Kantor's drawing: Panteon (1990). Courtesy of Anna Halczak.