

Epitaph for Tadeusz Kantor

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I.

Somebody is missing. When Max Frisch was dead, Elias Canetti wrote, "that he is no longer alive I do not want to believe. Tadeusz Kantor is missing. Answers to the question "Why?" arrange themselves into a mosaic. Because he represented, embodied something that is seldom found and becoming increasingly rare. Because the work he created remains ultimately uninterpretable in its multiple meanings but at the same time is unique and unforgettable.

The trace of his life and the fate of his life join the fate of the times, causing everyone to be affected in a way that seeps inwards. His persevering determination, his sometimes almost brutal relentlessness evoked strength. Jagoda Engelbrecht, who at the Berlin Festival worked cheek by jowl with him, twisted a "fuse of realization" as a declaration of love: a "spiritus rector, wizard, devil, god."

II.

It was cold. Outside, in December 1990. Suddenly, at two in the morning, death sat at my desk. Via telephone the message had come through from Kraków: A friend has died. We were separated by one and a half generations; but he was very close to me—in his theater, in his philosophy. His rooms of memory were fate and chance.

Deeper into the night, I continually went into his productions again. Daydreams which taught reality what fear is; reality that is receiving a different soil. He showed us that there is no way out, only a way. He showed us where we could go, if only we wanted. Now we have to live without his plays, without those deep-frozen vitamins for self-thawing. Life without his signposts is a life where we are all on our own again. His wooden crosses marked a path for us.

III.

"His sensitiveness was nothing but a protection against cloudiness and adulteration," this is how Canetti circumscribes Robert Musil whom he revered. And as though he had also known Tadeusz Kantor he continues: "Someone must have the strength to say to himself: I want it only like this. . . . The tension between the enormous wealth of a world that has already been taken in and everything that still wants to join up with it is tremendous. The decision about that which is to be rejected can only be made by the one who carries this world

within him, and the subsequent judgements by others about it, especially by those who carry no world within them at all, are presumptuous and pathetic."

IV.

In the funeral procession which went on for miles we silently compared clothes and faces. Insecurity and certainty were riding on a tandem with us. Starting out at Kantor's home, the Cricoteka, stumbling behind him, we walked his way to the end. Hours in rain and snow that no one noticed. A brass band led the procession intoning funeral marches—including the ones of his plays—over and over again. Trance as support. Mourning in the heart. It was bitterly cold. Giant ravens were cawing. Murmuring (after all nobody understood my German) I thanked Tadeusz for the fascinating cycle (which for me had started in 1968 with his first happening in Nürnberg) and for a piece of artistic fate. A last honour—a real one.

The funeral wake revealed a dismayed ensemble and inconsolable clusters of friends from everywhere. Into this speechlessness I thought of the trumpeter sounding the hours on the belfry of St.Mary's Church and the bricklayers who had taken off their hats to him, to his coffin. His people, his dead, his living.

V.

In the playing he challenged and loved them all. The process of play as the process of life. The relationship between the actors on stage and the audience below was newly defined and confoundingly tested. The creative act as a meeting place. Being-human revealed itself in the "total act" which mustered all physical-mental energies up to the point of self-renunciation of everyone involved. The "guest" becomes the participant in an event which happens anew each time and which demands of the actors the willingness to overcome their own limits. They are our limits as well. Along these railings ran Kantor's nervous, internal strolls. He built a momentary contact site for acting and reacting people.

VI.

After Krakow (for the first time in a country till then unknown to me) nothing is as it used to be. On several levels. This encounter has changed something in me that is hard to describe. A gate has been opened. I have opened something in myself, only for this country. Originality now stands against poor imitation, humility against the craze for triumph. The list could go on.

In exceptional situations people are more honest. They no longer wear masks, not even those for personal protection. That was a rare and good experience. Tadeusz Kantor still brought this about, winking as it were. Even though the bewilderment was general and nobody was hiding it, a few people came forward who I had misjudged before. Certain gestures and actions of certain personalities I will never forget. The loneliness of the individual was interrupted for a short time. Humanitas-community. The greatest thing is at issue, but it reads so small.

VII.

In these grey, bitterly serious December days I felt an inkling of the domains where madness might play. Scraps of memory from way earlier had a non-sensical, but almost sensual rendezvous with cuts from recent events. By no means all of that had to do with Kantor. His track, however, was the starting point for a whole harp of rails of imprints and impressions. I could not shut them off. I could not sort them. I was powerless. Miraculous and bewildering at the same time.

Christian Boltanski claims there are only very essential subjects in art. Death is among them. Death is perhaps what really counts. Death is. Death is always in life. Death is a master from "nowhere land". When Tadeusz Kantor said death, it sounded so matter-of-fact that he could not have said life any easier. When Kantor said death, however, it also sounded like objection; then he argued with memory against forgetting.

VIII.

A traveler is sitting in a station no longer in service. When does he realize that he is waiting in vain for a train? In the station hall there are no more schedules posted in the case. The window has been broken. Posters with landscape-shots, advertisements for tourist traffic, are shredded or sprayed over. There is no sign that this station is still in service.

And yet this tired wanderer has settled down on a bench, after having cleared some litter aside and taken off his backpack. Against all odds he is waiting for a train to arrive and to stop. Within the first hour a freight train and an express train thunder past.

The building—freestanding by two tracks, without a town belonging to it—gives him enough of a guarantee: He is in the right place, from which he will get home comfortably. He follows a logic and a sure fallacy: if no train stopped, there'd be no open station any more; at least it would be closed. Consequently he stays and hears trains going past for hours without giving up his conviction that his train will still come and stop.

For it is hard, maybe even impossible, for him to grasp that here waiting will no longer be rewarded. He has stretched out on the hard bench and pushed his backpack under his temple. Thus he falls into a slumber in the be-all and end-all of the station. His unshakeable patience, the deluding feeling of the impending ride home, successfully distract his senses from every detail . . . (The material for this epitaph stems from Botho Strauß.)

The circle closes. We remain Kantor-wanderers or -travelers, as the case may be.

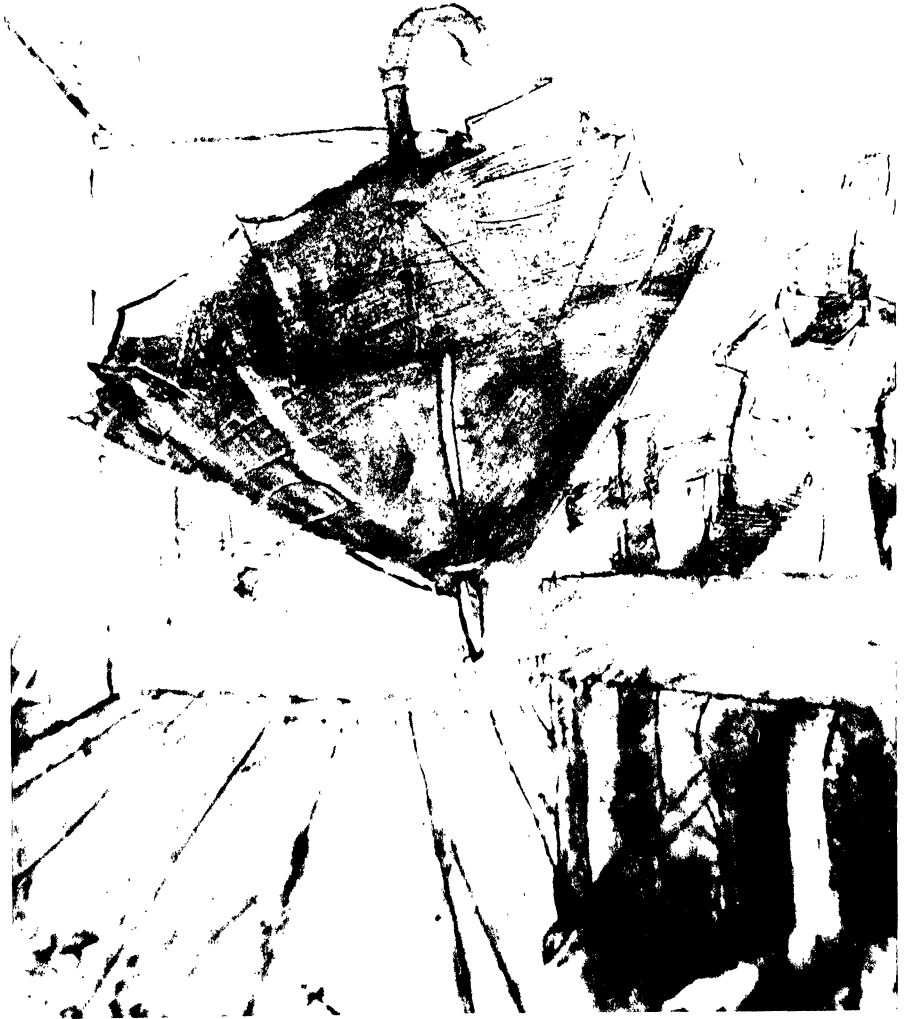


Fig. 19. Tadeusz Kantor's drawing: *Chłopiec Wławce* (1983). Courtesy of Anna Halczak.