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Maria Poprzęcka  
Faculty of “Artes Liberales”  
University of Warsaw

### **Tadeusz Kantor – an artist between local story and international fame**

I am very grateful for inviting me to make this, my first visit to Japan and I thank you for making this fascinating journey possible. I am also grateful for this opportunity to present to the public at the Kyoto Art Centre that great Polish artist – Tadeusz Kantor, a versatile artist – painter, creator of happenings and performances, art theorist, theatrical producer and stage director, and above all, the creator of his own unique theatre Cricot 2. The organizers of this meeting themselves suggested the theme of my speech and that is a moving testimony to the interest this extraordinary artist has always engendered in Japan. In the last, very active years of his life, filled with world tours, Kantor twice brought his theatre to Japan – in 1982 and 1990. After the artist's death, in 1994 and 1995 respectively, the Sezon Museum of Art in Tokyo and the Itami City Museum in Hyogo presented a large exhibition of his paintings and drawings, entitled *My Creation, My Journey*. In Hyogo, the exhibition survived the cataclysmic earthquake that struck that region of Japan at that time.

Kantor's body of work is enormous, amounting to hundreds of paintings and drawings, objects, installations, happenings, performances, and finally – most importantly – his own theatre's performances. Kantor's work, it must be remembered, covers almost half a century. The diverse phenomena leaving their mark on his work during that time included Surrealism, Informel, matter painting, new realism, assemblage, object art, happening, mail art, conceptualism, and finally the so-called new painting of the nineteen-eighties. Therefore, with regard to Kantor's work, we are faced with a highly diverse, multi-layered art. And at the same time, with a variety of problems – artistic, theoretical, historical and theatrical, as well as those to do with museums and archives. To these we can add the numerous publications, articles, commentaries and analyses that have been and continue to be devoted to Kantor's art. Polish and foreign researchers are examining the sources of his art, analyzing the twists and turns in his life and work, and tracing its impact on today's theatre. The intensity of these studies is favoured by today's historiography, focused primarily on the phenomenon of individual memory – the essence of the Kantor performances. Kantor's

intuitive use of "memory snapshots" has proven to be a precursor of today's artistic practices, not just in the theatre. Likewise, today's so-called post-dramatic theatre, based not on text but image, points to Kantor as its precursor. In turn, young researchers are attempting to critically revise Kantor's achievements and go beyond the recognized opinions currently in circulation. More than twenty years after his death, Kantor still turns out to be relevant, his work stimulating research, discussion and also disputes.

On the other hand, Kantor is recalled by those of his actors and collaborators still living, along with the critics and exegetes who accompanied him in life. They create a primarily artistic legend of Kantor as a charismatic creative spirit with a unique personality. The artist himself also created his own mythology. He did so not only with his art, but also his attitude to life, his general manner and way of dressing. Kantor was not only a great artist. He was also a great master of image. He never abandoned the romantic concept of the artist as a unique individual, elevated above mediocrity. In his strategies, he was not afraid to shock or cause scandal. He spoke and wrote much about himself and his art. His published writings fill several substantial volumes. These are not simply the author's commentaries. Rather they are poetic manifestos, artistic avowals of what he believed in. And along with these, were lectures, public speeches, interviews, conversations and personal notations, always loaded with strong emotions.

It is impossible to summarize all this in one lecture. Faced with the necessity of making a selection for the meeting in Kyoto, I decided to choose two matters that seem to me to be particularly relevant and currently valid. The first is the question of how Kantor, an artist so rooted in Polish history and traditions, managed to solve the dilemma and reconcile his Polishness and universality. The second issue is the present situation of Kantor's art, when after many years of effort, a magnificent museum dedicated to Kantor has been opened in Kraków.

The problem of preserving national identity in what is now a global art world is a vast and complicated one. The person and works of Kantor seem to offer a perfect case study here. It is a dilemma, with which many artists from countries far from the artistic centres struggle in vain – artists coming from modest peripheries, and dreaming of joining the global art world, wishing to break through the limitations arising from both external barriers and those determined by historical formation and national mentality. So many of Polish Art's great achievements – in fields such as poetry, romantic drama or painting from the era of symbolism – usually turn out to be

inaccessible for non-Polish viewers or readers. Incomprehensible, not only due to the difficult language. Such works are primarily inaccessible without some knowledge of the context of our history, the national myths, and the Polish traumas, obsessions and complexes that have dominated Polish art since the nineteenth century. Which raises the question how come Kantor's work, growing out of his most personal and private experience, proved comprehensible and moving for other audiences around the world. It exceeded the boundaries of language, culture, religion and customs. How did this artist manage to make the tiny, Polish-Jewish town of Wielopole, located *in the middle of nowhere*, in a Central European province, the "hub of the universe" and – paradoxically – was equally well understood and admired in Paris, Buenos Aires and Tokyo. In the last years of his life, filled with international successes, Kantor said: "I am madly nationalist and even – so to speak – madly provincial". And yet he exhibited and worked all over the world. And admitted: "I don't know why it is that I've been able to communicate with the whole world, when all the time I was just communicating with myself."

Kantor willingly compared his life and career to a journey, and the artist to the itinerant salesman offering art as his wares. During the more than fifty years he spent travelling the world, Kantor seems to have been at a continuous crossroads. The artist was constantly choosing various paths – towards abstraction and figuration, tradition and the avant-garde, reality and imagination. Fully aware of this, he once said: "If development is traditionally presented in the form of a straight line, a spiral or concentric lines, then the graphic plotting of my work would be a labyrinth. And it's precisely the fact that there's no way out which proves we are on the right track. In art – of course."

Let's try to enter that maze. Tadeusz Kantor (1915 – 1990) was born shortly after the outbreak of the First World War and died when the nations of the former Soviet bloc were still euphoric over the fall of communism. His life therefore spanned the greatest events of the twentieth century. As a young man, he began art studies in Krakow – the former Polish capital, a city of great historical traditions and a legendary artistic atmosphere. The Second World War for Poland meant nearly six years (1939-1945) of cruel Nazi occupation, during which Kantor, along with a small group of friends, created an illegal Independent Theatre in a private apartment (any strictly Polish artistic activity was prohibited). Here he put on two classic Polish dramas, but staged in an extremely severe, avant-garde form. A few poor objects,

found in the trash, were later to become constant props for his performances. He called them "the reality of the lowest rank," in which he saw the source of his art. This was even described as oscillating "between the trash can and eternity."

After the war, Kantor took a job as a stage designer. He managed to go to Paris, which to Poles was still the artistic capital of the world. Like other artists who had the chance to pass through the "iron curtain" dividing Europe, he absorbed the current artistic trends there. He adapted in turn a "metaphorical" version of surrealism, then Informel painting, happening, new figuration, environment, and the conceptual Fluxus movement...

All this, however, was not merely the eclectic acquisition of fashionable trends, but became material for his own art, which over the years gained a more and more personal, clearly recognizable character. This was art on the border between painting, theatre, happening and environment. Kantor explained its basis in successive manifestos: *Informel Theatre* (1961), *The Autonomous Theatre*, *The Zero Theatre* (1963), *Complexes Theatre* (1966), *The Impossible Theatre* (1973), and finally, *The Theatre of Death* (1975). Initially, the artist drew on texts by Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, also known as "Witkacy" – a painter, philosopher and playwright who had carried out a radical demolition of theatrical conventions (*In a Little Manor House*, 1961, the performance *The Madman and the Nun*, 1963, *The Water Hen*, 1967, and *Lovelies and Dowdies*, 1973). These were not traditional productions, but "games with Witkacy". This was because the essence of Kantor's Cricot 2 theatre, already established in 1955, was the idea of autonomous theatre, guided by its own laws and shaping its own reality. It centred round not a literary text, but the actor and his acting. Later, the actors too were treated as objects, deprived of their traditional functions. United with objects and props, they became bio-objects, mannequins, human dummies moved by the hand of the spectacle's omnipotent Author. "The appearance of a mannequin on stage is in line with my ever stronger conviction that life can be expressed in art only by a lack of life, by reference to death" explained Kantor.

Kantor demonstrated this taking over of his actors' roles in a shocking way at the *Popular Exhibition – Anti-Exhibition* accompanying a performance of Witkacy's play *The Madman and the Nun* (1963). Called the first Polish environment play, it consisted of various objects, sketches, scraps of paper and notes pinned any old how to the walls, and hung like laundry put out to dry. During the theatrical performance, a frightful *annihilating machine* threw and pushed the artists around. This absurd,

iconoclastic object also signalled Kantor's abandonment of painting, to which, however, he was to return at the end of his life.

In the 1960s and '70s, Kantor was already very active on the international scene. He travelled and put on exhibitions in Europe and the USA. He presented para-theatrical actions in Switzerland, Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Sweden, Yugoslavia and Brazil. He also organised happenings in Warsaw and Kraków, but in Nuremberg, Oslo and Rome as well. The most famous and impressive of these from that time were *The Anatomy Lesson According To Rembrandt* (1968) and *Panoramic Sea Happening*, performed on the Baltic coast (1967). Something occurred during precisely this seaside, plein air event, which would prove a turning point in Kantor's career. The artist recalled: "In a small town. Almost a village. One street. Shabby little bungalows. And one of the poorest: a school. It was the summer holidays. The school was empty and abandoned. It had just the one classroom. It could be seen through the grimy panes of two small windows placed low, just above pavement level. It gave the impression that the school was sinking beneath the street. I glued my face to the window. For a long time I was looking into my own dark and clouded memory. I was a little boy again, sitting in a small rural classroom, on a bench scratched by pen-knives, my damp fingers ink-stained from turning the pages of my primer, the floorboards with deeply worn knots from continuous scrubbing, the bare feet of the country boys somehow well suited to that floor. Whitewashed walls, their plaster crumbling, and a black cross on the wall." This image, seen by chance, became the backdrop for his spectacle *Dead Class*, considered a masterpiece of Kantor's theatre and one of the most important theatrical events of the twentieth century. It was calculated that the performance was shown a total of more than 500 times in 56 destinations, in 20 countries, on 5 continents.

From that time on, following the success of *Dead Class*, memory became the primary material of Kantor's art. In the case of his next spectacle *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), an old family photograph played the same role of "memory snapshot" as the view of the poor rural classroom. It shows Kantor's father with his comrades-in-arms going off to war in 1914. The whole spectacle evokes his hometown of Wielopole Skrzyńskie and the artist's childhood. Kantor wrote: "This is the room of my childhood. I try to reconstruct it in my memory, over and over again, but it keeps disappearing and fading. I recall it and it disappears, I recall and it fades away... There's never any action in memory, only snapshots... These images get mixed up. An

image of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* is superimposed over the snapshot of my room. And that *Last Supper* now takes place in the cemeteries of today's world."

The next, third Theatre of Death spectacle, *Let Artists Die* was likewise constructed according to "memory snapshots". This was a stream of overlapping images "summoned from the past, <masquerading> as the present, appearing <from nowhere>, a jumble of objects, people and situations ... and in this crazy exchange, losing all the logic applying to real life." Where the action takes place has nothing to do with a real, tangible place. Kantor called it "My Poor Little Room of the Imagination without walls, ceiling or floor." This Poor Little Room of the Imagination was to appear constantly as the artist's inner space in his work from then on, right up to the last images. And the same figures were to keep reappearing: "Wanderers and their baggage, the Boys from the time of my happy youth, Old folk returning to the school's Dead Class, children locked into their school pews like prisoners, Tramps, Jews – the Eternal Wanderers, People fused into one with their objects – with a table, a chair, a door, a window, with death, with a lover... Soldiers going to the front, my family, my mother, father, relatives... "

The last spectacle performed by Kantor was *I Shell Never Return*. It was a kind of last will and testament, and at the same time his settling of accounts with his art. Here the artist changed his role. Previously he had always accompanied the actors on stage, like a conductor directing an orchestra. Now he played himself. Figures from his early plays appeared on stage – like ghosts summoned from the past. Each of them kept their original costumes and props, but their role had changed. They were no longer obedient players of the roles assigned by the director. Liberated, they ridicule the artist and execute him. In a premonition of death, Kantor directs a message to them: "I'm falling. Damn it, I'm falling!... Be with me for a moment at the bottom. The artist must always be at the bottom, because only from there, can he shout to be heard. Perhaps there, at the bottom, we will understand each other. And after that, don't descend into hell."

Kantor did not live to see the premiere of his last play *Today is My Birthday*. In it, the artist concluded his thoughts on death, the approach of which had become almost a creative tool. The artist's death and even his funeral here became structural elements of the performance.

But returning to the question posed at the outset, what was it that ensured Kantor's art, especially his *Theatre of Death*, international acclaim and recognition? It is worth recalling that ever since *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), Kantor created far from his home town performances that were increasingly immersed in private memories. Not in Poland, nor in his artistic headquarters in Kraków. Along with his troupe, he worked during long artistic stays in Florence, Nuremberg (*Let Artists Die*), Milan (*I Shell Never Return*) and Toulouse (*Today is My Birthday*).

My answer may be just a personal reflection. It's the reflection of someone who got to see all of Kantor's great live performances. And – consequently – someone who can remember far back into the past. By means of the very name *Theatre of Death*, Kantor directs us towards eschatology, to issues of finality. Towards death, a subject that modern civilization ousts from its consciousness. However, Kantor chose the theme of death not in order to remind us about it. He chose it so that the theatre might again begin to arouse feelings. Death or the very thought of death causes stronger emotions in people than those arising from an awareness of life. And for the material of his art, the artist chose memory. Individual memory, and therefore the memory of each of us, his audience. This enabled him to move each and every one of us. Everyone who is afraid of death, who has lost loved ones, who is haunted by the shadows of the dead.

On the other hand, Kantor's love for the marginal, the strange, that which is individual, his contempt for "universal and official" history, along with his defence of the "minor, defenceless, but magnificent History of individual human lives" – must strike a chord with anyone who feels slighted or stifled by the anonymous, massive machinery of history, anyone who is moved not by great events, but how people survive them, those who for years remain present in our minds.

But all this fails to explain the power and universality of the Kantor theatre's impact. What primarily evokes emotions is the form of the work. Here the decisive factor turned out to be the artist's imagination and intuition, which demanded that we evoke the imperfect mechanisms of human memory. Memory that is our, the audience's experience. Memory that can be intrusive and deceptive, painful and soothing, full of gaps and chaotic. Memory that is inconsistent, with superimposed and jumbled snapshots, but always individual, personal and unique. "Our past – wrote Kantor – sometimes becomes a forgotten warehouse, where along with feelings, snapshots and images of things that were once very close, there are also amassed

objects, clothes, faces and events. Their inertia is only a simulation, because you only need to touch them and they begin living once more in the memory and in harmony with the present. Such an image does not imply nostalgia or senile sentimentality, but is an expression of our desire for a full, complete life, a life of past, present and future."

Seeking to explain the phenomenon of Kantor, let's also consider his confession: "I don't believe that art can change anything. Faced with the might of civilization, technology, politics, communication – art is defenceless. Art saves only the individual, not society. However, in the face of mass ideology, mass murder, wars and mass revolution – only art can defend the small individual against barbarism." So, as long as we are defending our individuality, we can find help in Kantor's art. His work proves that what in art is singular, unique and personal can be universally comprehensible and moving.

However, one may ask whether, nearly twenty-five years after the artist's death, Kantor's art still moves? This is the second issue that (much more briefly) I wish to discuss here. The opening of a new museum in Kraków is an opportunity to reflect on the present-day situation of Kantor's art. Kantor was a man of contradictions. His attitude to museums was also ambivalent. He could on the one hand, with his typical passion, criticize museums as dead institutions killing art (museum = mausoleum). He saw the museum's "consumption" of art as "bourgeois cannibalism." At the same time, however, he saw in museums a chance for art to survive and rebuked them for not providing sufficient protection against the destruction of artworks. Kantor saw himself as a pilgrim, a wanderer, a salesman on a continuous journey, bearing a large bundle of art. At the same time, however, he dreamed of a House, a home in which to find a safe haven. He fulfilled that dream in the last years of his life by building a country house among picturesque foothills in a place called Hucisko.

Kantor often spoke of his fear of becoming fixed, the immobilization of works of art, and his own work and activities. An essential and permanent element of his work and his existential and creative attitude was the journey. His work was meant to be mobile in character and not a monument. And yet, as the years passed, the artist increasingly worried about the fate of his work, which was largely of a fragile nature. He therefore decided to create an institution, then without precedent, that would combine multiple functions. This was to accommodate a collection, an exhibition, reconstructions of stage situations, an archive, a reading room, a lecture hall, a works



studio, and an atelier. At the same time it was to be a place of live artistic events. This place became Cricoteka, opened in 1980, housed in a historic town house in the heart of Kraków's old town. The artist himself designed all of Cricoteka's fittings – cabinets and filing and documentation systems. Organizing the Cricot 2 Theatre Museum, Kantor wished to keep mainly stage objects in it. He recreated lost theatrical machinery, costumes and props. He raised objects functioning in performances to the rank of artefacts. They became autonomous works of art, and at the same time were meant to recall the ideas contained in performances of the past. For – as Kantor wrote: "When a man and his work cease to exist – there remains only the memory, the message sent into the future to the next generation."

Kantor saw Cricoteka as his monument. To what extent this place was fused in people's minds with his person can be seen in the fact that when in December 1990, news of the artist's unexpected death spread through Kraków, the residents lit candles outside the museum. After that, it became a habit that in successive anniversaries of his death, Kantor's actors donned costumes and lined its entrance with living monuments – the Eternal Wanderer and two Hasidic Jews with the Last Lifeline. Even if Cricoteka did not become the place of a posthumous cult, it is most certainly a place focusing emotions and memories of the artist.

In the autumn of this year, 24 years after Kantor's death, Cricoteka moved to an impressive new headquarters. Like many new museum institutions around the world, the new Cricoteka is located in an, until recently, neglected section of the city that has undergone urban renewal. Its facilities are "absorbed" by the historic structure of an old power plant. The inspiration here must have been Kantor's drawing showing a man carrying a table on his back. The institution's change of address also means a new program for Cricoteka's activities. In addition to the permanent exhibition of Kantor's works, Cricoteka focuses on the interdisciplinary, performance activities of a younger generation of artists. Even those for whom Kantor is already a distant, indifferent historical figure.

The opening of the new Cricoteka sparked much debate and controversy. If I mention them, it is because they concern not only the special case of the Kantor museum. They reveal problems and contradictions inherent in many contemporary museum activities. Especially where we are dealing with impermanent art that defies traditional methods of museum presentation.

This raises basic questions. How to show in a gallery a work that no longer exists and which was meant to remain ephemeral? Should one be faithful to the artist, or handle his work as seen from other, new perspectives? For Kantor himself, more important than the physical effect was the moment of its creation. He suggested recognizing the creative process as the work proper. Rehearsals, not performances; drawings, studies, and not finished paintings, were what counted. The whole staffage remaining after the work was meant to say more about the creative process than the final product. Without cataloguing it in terms of importance or chronology, the artist held on to this inventory, material usually condemned to be thrown out since it has already fulfilled its role. The idea was to show what was most important to the artist, that fever of creation.

The art of Kantor's theatre was art requiring a living presence. The presence of its creator, actors and audience. The electrifying atmosphere of its performances. The unique aura created by Kantor like a shaman hypnotizing his surroundings. After Kantor's death, it soon became clear that his theatre could not continue, or even remain in the form given it by the artist. *Nothing Else Beyond* – as Kantor entitled the Museum's inaugural exhibition (1988). Today, the Cricot 2 Theatre exists only in the props and relics keeping alive the memory of those who participated in and witnessed the travels of the theatre made famous by the creator of *Dead Class*. But those are becoming less numerous. On the other hand, we are seeing the arrival of those "born late", who are faced with the legend. The new Cricoteka is addressed primarily to them. The objects and archives on display in the exhibition reproduce the seven stages of Kantor's theatrical creativity – in accordance with his concept. The viewer follows the path leading from the underground theatre of the occupation era to successive incarnations of the Kantor theatre and its successive performances. That path is marked by partially reconstructed and renovated props once selected by Kantor as the most important in his artistic journey. However, this excellent exhibition, from a museum point of view, raises some objections – being so far removed in its character from the Poor Room of the Imagination. Do these poor objects, raised to the rank of works of art, impressively lit and lifted out of the darkness, retain their original meaning as "the reality of the lowest rank"?

For now, there is no consensus between the "memory keepers" and the "born late". However, both sides to the dispute are basically struggling with the same

problem. In their various ways they are trying to halt the passage of time. Such activity is always doomed to failure. But invariably begun again.