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Monsters, Monstrosity and Hybrid Genres
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Discontinuity of the Unified Subject, and Memory Ghosts as Ready-Made Objects in the Theater of Tadeusz Kantor

I am...on stage.
I will not be a performer.
Instead poor fragments of my
own life
will become
ready-made objects¹

The very presence of the puppeteer creates the marionette. The form of the marionette deforms the puppeteer. Given this intimate relationship, the director is a parasite, though a productive one.²

In this paper, I investigate the relationship between *The Dead Class* (1975), a performance work by the Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor, and the question of “hailing the individual subject into being” (Althusser 1971) within a state apparatus. Theatrically, Kantor is creating sets of rules, limitations, and repetitive tasks, thus reproducing, while ironically commenting upon, an archaic educational system within a communist state. The dark, sardonic spectacle of repetition and loss of individual agency is taking place in the shadow of the overwhelming spectacle of Western consumerism. In Kantor’s vision, the eschatological idea of escape from the boundaries of repetitive circulation of history and memory objects, gains an ironic dimension. The West is both an individual dream, and an imminent loss of a dream of a higher realm.

¹ *To Save from Oblivion* (Kantor 1988: 171)

² From *Ten Theses to Subvert a Work (A Manifesto)*, thesis number 3: “Accept interferences” (Weiss 2006: 393)

Hence, I am engaging with the work of Kantor in order to revisit the entangled psychological landscapes inhabited with cyclical repetitions and what appear to be historical inevitabilities, which produce fragmented existences. I am inquiring into how an artistic reentering into the past can propose modes of reinventing perception, identity, and power through viewing, thinking, and writing about art in relation to dying. The displacement of myth, propelled by the speed and flux characteristic of the experience of the modern time, results in the self-reflexive acknowledgment of the physical death, and the accompanying mental void. This void is revealed in the breach, the space of *aporia*, exposed by the disappearance of unified religious thought. Thus, the hermeneutics that I attempt will remain a clandestine activity, removed from the binary divides, exposing the wounds in the identity construct. Paul Ricœur expounded on the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, doubting the instantaneous consciousness. The creative interpreting that I take on is a complex progression of “unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning” (Ricœur 1969:16).

The inquiry begins with a question that will remain open, even though I acknowledge the multiple attempts at answering: how does the awareness of death and the events that immediately surround it – the bureaucratic repercussions of predicting death and of the personal inner void caused by the loss – inform one’s mode of being in the world? There are three aspects of Tadeusz Kantor’s work that I find both intriguing and relevant in approaching the theme of death as a conceptual as well as physical occurrence. First: the mannequin – a monstrous imitation of a human. The doll also possesses sentimental values, as it is a reminder of one’s childhood self, a self that could be easily manipulated, changed, transformed. On stage, the mannequin sometimes also

appears as a surrogate for the corpse. The second aspect is the live body of an actor representing a dead person – self without memory, moving like an automaton. The third aspect is the role of the puppeteer, who enters the space as a director and an author of the spectacle inhabited by the shadows from his past. Initially, he is a menacing presence, meant to control the entire rigidified apparatus. Later, he almost loses control. There is fear that he will not be able to control the rage, and that the chaotic outbursts of repressed violence will escalate. But, through the nuances of his performance, he gradually takes on a role of a trickster, abiding in the unresolved space between tragic recollections of traumatic experiences, and comical attempts to restage his own childhood. His simplified but expressive body language, and the delicate manner in which he gives stage directions, reiterate the unseen boundaries accompanying the imprisonment of a theatrical representation. His subjectivity is displaced through a proliferation of arbitrary occurrences and inanimate objects. The marginalized objects and arbitrarily assembled images flood the memory, disturbing any attempt to achieve inner coherency. The poetics of death and the reinscribing of formal arrangements from a historicized past are purposefully devoid of emotional content. Forms are multiplied, without ever becoming enclosed in fully determinable meanings. These three aspects are the energetic and hermeneutic loci that allow my writing to develop into multiple directions, including literary references from other times and spaces, philosophical expansion of the specific into general, and particular historical reminders and resonances.

Allen Weiss's book *Breathless – Sound Recording, Disembodiment and the Transformation of Lyrical Nostalgia* provides an important source for tracing the historical trajectory of death and illness as poetic tropes of modernity. This book inspires

a movement across disciplinary and cultural boundaries in search for hidden similarities. The relatively new aesthetic paradigm of a solipsistic, often ill artist, who experiences ghostly apparitions, has its roots in the Romanticism of the nineteenth century. This period lends imagistic resonances to the displaced logic of Kantor's processions of automatons. References from Romantic art, Surrealism and Dada disturb tendencies to locate origins of Kantor's theater solely in his own culture and geographical region. The theme of re-enacting dead, frozen, feeling-less bodies, in response to the occurrence of recombined forms of physical and psychic suffering, persevered throughout the 20th century. These are responses to the abuses of the scientific and technological innovations within power structures of the modern capitalist society.

Philosopher Gilles Deleuze writes that modern nation-states "combine social subjection and the machinic enslavement" (Deleuze 1980: 459). Tadeusz Kantor made most of his art during the Cold War era, thus resisting both the bureaucratic subjugation of individuals and minorities within the Soviet Union-ruled Eastern bloc, and the extreme, spectacular commodification of Western capitalism. His oeuvre reflects radical criticism of the perception of time as linear progression. In the positivist models, the past is to be perceived as backwards and, consequently, is radically different, inherently primitive, and a safe zone for sentimental identifications and mythic projections. This kind of past is not supposed to have any felt effect on the forward moving individual. It is frozen into stilted images open to projections, and reduced to *reliquiae* accompanied by the ritualistic thought repetitions from which immediately experienced impressions are almost completely excluded. In *The Dead Class*, characters enter *Tableaux Vivants* and repetitively enact their stultified childhood memories.

Towards the end of his life, Kantor said about his work:

It is impossible to talk about my theatre without giving an image of that inhuman epoch. The world war, the murderer god, the death camps, slavery, the supreme political idea of genocide – followed by half a century of power being exercised by people with the untouchable title of the first secretary, representing absolute primitivism in the exercise of that power, before the eyes of the entire civilized and indifferent world (Porebski: 130)

He was speaking in relationship to Stalinist terror but also referring to World War One, when Poland was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire³; the German invasion of Poland⁴ in 1939; the Holocaust; and the world-wide bureaucratization of state apparatuses after the two wars. The great historical narratives produced in the aftermath of wars, rendered attempts towards individual honesty to appear absurd and sentimental. Concomitant mass-production of objects, and commodification of media-produced news, distorted ideas about normal behaviors, and rendered individual lives as replaceable. The recorded spectacle of the war machine and the invention of death camps as forms of mass murder that demonstrated moral collapse and an increased efficiency in destroying one's adversaries brought organized violence, in a new way, into the everyday experience of civilian subjects. The everyday in Kantor's theater is affected by these violent, new, and uncontrollable intrusions on the privacy of one's memories. These grand events are now recorded, visually remembered and thus, require a new kind of passivity from its spectators – removed, indirect.

Kantor was interested in illusions, magic, phantoms, and discarded objects. His idea of "reality of the lowest rank" is derived from the story by Bruno Shultz. Images from the school life, from *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass*, appear as poetic fragments within Kantor's world of mechanical, repetitive behavior. The puppet-like

³ Poland lost its independence in 1759.

⁴ The invasion of Poland by German and Soviet forces marks the beginning of the Second World War.

actors carry their young dead selves as they encounter the invisible ghosts of their past. References from the Holocaust interrupt the nostalgic replaying of school memories. In Kantor's theater of automata, no real communication or conflict is necessary; things repeat themselves seemingly of their own will.

The theme of the return of the dead haunted Kantor's work from the early days. Tadeusz Kantor was born in 1915 in Wielopole, a small town near Krakow (Plesnarowicz 2000: 11). The Wielopole of Kantor's childhood was a meeting place of two religions: Jewish and Catholic. The photograph of the Catholic priest and the rabbi is a recurring theme in Kantor's plays (2000:12). The mechanical voices repeating songs, incantations, history lessons and Christian and Hebrew prayers eventually transform into seemingly meaningless babble, glossolalia comprised of multiple voices speaking simultaneously. The effect is reminiscent of the voice of the shadow in Poe's *Shadow – A Parable*. Poe's formalist experimentations with language transformed by the modern consciousness left an imprint on Kantor as a young artist⁵. Poe's shadow speaks in the voice of "multitude beings". The fragmentation of the modern subject is set against continuously moving machinery. The chaotic repetitions and overwhelming spectacle render any attempt to preserve the past as a unified whole futile. The characters of the story are awaiting death, while the characters of Kantor's play are already dead.

Within the world of Kantor, the controlling apparatus reproduces circumstances of the confinement charactering traditional hierarchies. Death itself appears as a cleaning lady. The chaos of the modern world, with its noise, abundance of reproduction and meaningless recombining of known forms as a source of entertainment, initiates

⁵ In the "Theatre of Death" manifesto from 1975 Kantor mentions Kleist, Hoffman and Poe as his precursors from 19th century (Kantor 1975: 250).

fragmentation of an individual subject. Actors are dressed in school uniforms; some wear what appear to be funeral suits. A dead soldier enters in a uniform from the First World War. The class structures, and divisions across generation and gender, are apparent but disturbed (distorted) through a mixing of ages and frequent exchanges of roles. Layers of disjointed memories invade the space and disallow organized hierarchical structuring of the stage space. The appearances and behaviors do not necessarily match each other. The actors and mannequins are dressed formally, and hold their bodies with the propriety of children from a repressed middle class. The middle class appears disjointed, disturbed, pushed into madness. It owes its chaotic incarnations to wars and to the totalitarian, but superficial, ideology attempting to force the utopia of classless society into sudden realization and to hide differences under the appearance of complete uniformity. Actors are able to escape into their repetitive routines, urgently entering into trance-like states, and embodying fragments from ancient myths, photographs, and literature. However, there is no purposeful creation of change. Chaos, in this case, indicates loss of form, not creative potential. It is the absence of life that paradoxically animates the stage.

The shadow in the story by Poe speaks to the dead, but the voice is not recognizable (Weiss 2002: 22). The new poetics resonates with contemporary innovations in recording technology, and the effects they had on the psyche. To Poe's characters' fantastic meeting with death manifested through the appearance of its spirit, Allen Weiss juxtaposes the problem of modern subjectivity. He writes:

These psychic syndromes proffered the phantasmatic origins of sound recording and established a prime scenario for incorporating the effects of recording technology in the forms of poetry and desire. A new type of nostalgic lyricism was inaugurated, motivated by new forms of reproductive prosthetics and technological memento mori at the core of new epistemology. (2002:22).

Although working in the Eastern bloc, faced with the exaggeration of the binaries between the East and the West, and with the mythic return of tyrannical governing machinery in his country causing the idealization of Western freedoms, Kantor's theater demonstrated revolutionary sensibility. He was working outside prescribed norms. He avoided idealization of Western culture, and expressed a preference for absurdist aesthetics, and for ridicule. He admired the humor and simplicity of Dada artists working before the First World War. He was well aware of the dynamics between artistic movements in the West, especially in France. Daniel Gerould sees Kantor as "a bridge from one age to another", from the *fin-de-siecle* to the turn of the 21st century. Although he did visit the West, he made lot of his art in relative isolation, and incorporated influences from previous periods in a way that corresponded to his unique artistic vision, and did not sway from his aesthetic ideals.

Kantor shared Poe's obsession with the ghostly realms between life and death, and fantastic spaces where the dead can appear as not only insubstantial apparitions but also living entities, or elements belonging to living entities (voices, psychic signs, shadows, body parts, anthropomorphic animals). Thus, the question about the essence of being alive is presented through the re-appearance of the dead as moving, sounding automatons. How do we know that these human-like machines are not alive? Is the death of the thinking, living subject more horrifying than the corporeal death of the physical body? What happened to those who did not die in the Great Wars, but have witnessed deaths of their loved ones, and deaths of thousands they did not even know existed? Has the new media spread death everywhere? Has the war machinery manipulated the subjects into a

new state, where there is no real future, no possibility of progress, no possibility of distinguishing the real and the ever more sophisticated simulacra of the real?

The Dead Class revolves around memories from the early period of Kantor's life, when he was living in a small suburban town. The texts he chose to cite in his theater reflect the isolation and loneliness of growing up surrounded by provincial mentality. Someone else, not the inhabitants themselves, is directing the spectacle. Individual actors and objects he encounters in his dream-like theater are parts of the self-conscious mechanism that prevents an awakening to new potential for conscious change. They paradoxically, through their enactments, disclose the workings of this deadly mechanism, and thus deconstruct their own imprisonment in front of the audience, offering tools for dis-identification.

Kantor's theater is animated by the ghosts of literary texts. It is a theater of repressed impressions, residual sensual experiences, and reduced aesthetical statements without narrative development. Kantor makes multiple quotations from writings by Bruno Shulz, and inserts sequences from *Tumor Mózgowicz*, written in 1921 by the Polish author Witkiewicz. Here a scientist, rather than an artist, challenges the habitual perceptions of working of the human mind (Gerould: 1966).

The trauma appears on the surface. The wounds opened by mass murders of entire populations and by perpetual loss of human dignity are rendered abstract through purposeful reduction to the essentials. Completely devoid of context, these essentials easily become absurd, outside the logic of common sense.

Corpses are resurrected in order to die again to the tune of the war march which, like the waltz *Francois* in *The Dead Class*, fades only in order to explode a moment later. (Kott 1984: 161)

Kott emphasizes that in Kantor's theater, the living are already dead. The return to the school bench marks a false beginning. The subjects from Kantor's childhood photos return to haunt him with their stories. However, those stories can never develop, as they are part of others' memory machinery.

Humans and mannequins play each other. The mannequins from Bruno Shulz make their ghostly appearance in the theater of Tadeuz Kantor. In *Sanatorium under the Sign of the Hourglass* we find depictions of the Galician tradition of "Traveling Waxworks". Shulz describes mannequins as "misery of imprisoned matter, of tortured matter which does not know what it is and why it is, nor where the gesture may lead that has been imposed on it forever" (Shulz 1977: 64). Both actors and mannequins of Kantor's theater seem devoid of free will. However, the actors enter ecstatic states in which the repressed energies of their bodies reduced to their unused (latent) residues, lead towards explosions of movement and expression. These states culminate in bursts of gestural language and vocal noise. We witness musical climaxes and rhythmical resolutions, but not narrative developments. Behaviors are re-combined, distorted, but always filled with references to their previous incarnations. The actors are caught within controlling mechanisms they do not understand, and do not seem interested in understanding, and which they are not able to alter, without initiating another round of cyclical repetition. They escape into their lifeless memories, in which they need mannequins to play their substitute youthful selves. These unmoving doubles are carried around, appearing at first as ironic images of ideal students, never showing any signs of resistance, and later as literal victims, dead bodies placed in a pile next to the school bench. However, they soon make a ghostly reappearance as witnesses of a seemingly endless spectacle. Once again, mannequins are

seated on their benches, playing obedient unmoving audiences: non-reactive, deaf to the turbulences of the external world.

Puppets have a long history in European theater. They were seen in mystery plays, opera and *commedia dell'arte*, but were mostly outside the domain of serious theater until the early 20th century (Jurkowsky 1998: 1). Modernism, with its phenomenological concerns and interest in pure subjectivity, found the artificiality of the puppet more honest than the trained pretense utilized by live actors. Puppets had no personality, and thus, could communicate that which is essential in the human experience.

In Kantor's work, puppets express simplified ideas from, and about, youth; they are carried around, resisting processes of disintegration of the past. They interrupt the desire to move away from the past through their ghostly reappearances. They are both unattainable ideals for live actors and also heavy burdens that the actors must carry around. They are often ridiculous, as they do not fit into the order of everyday reality, no matter where they are placed.

Kantor spends time adjusting a single mannequin seated on the bench. As he moves the head gently, we are made acutely aware of the lack of volition in the object Kantor is manipulating. She seems relaxed in her seated posture; the folds of her costume add to the illusion of a human body, and we can almost imagine the breath of the body suddenly awakened from the stupor of dead matter. The isolated mannequin looks like a shy student, her hair falling out in an unruly manner, adding to the imaginary presence of movement in the inanimate copy. As the mannequin is easily manipulated, it appears to have more life in it than another inanimate object, the school bench. In relationship to the solidity of the wooden object, she appears close to life.

All the inanimate objects in Kantor's space – “a simulacrum without resemblance or similitude to the outside world”⁶ – function as ready-mades from Dada artists. Objects such as the *Family Machine*, the *Mechanical Cradle*, two wooden balls, a window frame, and an old bicycle are all in a metonymical relationship to the imaginary worlds. They are suspended in the ambiguous, claustrophobic corridor between the dead, who appear as fragments in memories, and the survivors to whom the memories belong. Objects signify inconsistencies in dominant meta-narratives and structured recollections. The objects Kantor chooses to display are often marginal, bizarre details of everyday existence. They also appear as mythical guardians, preserving the boundaries between the living and the dead. Through their persistent solidity, they prevent reminiscences from dreams and the subconscious from flooding the physical world.

Kantor derives his relationship with the ghosts of the dead from Jewish legends. He mentions *Dybbuk* as a source for the use of language in his theater (Plesniarowicz: 189). The voices of the dead are heard through the mouths of live actors. Thus, the actors engage in ventriloquism, while inanimate objects create an archaeological landscape, in which various layers of history meet on the same plane. At one point, human actors begin to imitate mannequins, taking on their dignified stillness. The boundaries between being alive, and imitating life for purposes of performance, are blurred.

In their immobility, the mannequins represent obstacles. They have to be carried around in order for the actors to continue to play their roles. They symbolize the impossibility of bringing old memories back to life. They are signs of the repression of

⁶ The world of Tadeusz Kantor is without psychological depth. The objects and live actors appear on equal footing with each other, neither taking on a role of the real.

subjects who desire to move forward without their multiple, complex, interrelated histories. In an attempt to disregard the past, they appear caught in cyclical repetition.

Kantor worked with both professional and amateur actors. He began rehearsing for *The Dead Class* in the Krysztofory Gallery in December, 1974 (Pleisniarowicz: 118). The cast included actors from Bagatela and the Grotoska, a few painters and one metal worker. Lila Krasicka remembers that Kantor was dissatisfied with all the actions becoming automatic after 500 performances of *The Dead Class*. He did not want to make what he termed bourgeois theater. He wanted to preserve individual traits in his art. In his view, Dada artists were successful in resisting commercial tastes and academic canons. Attitudes and perfection of execution were important to him. Today, when we view his work we can notice a new kind of perfection emerging, one bound to repetition with alterations. This kind of repetition erases clear boundaries between individual traits and collective reenactments. Ironic discrepancies, and unexpected outbursts, disturb attempts towards easy classification and formulaic interpretation. Repetition illustrates historical movements, and the loss of understandable subjectivity.

Actors, carrying their doubles, fall into cyclical repetitions, embodying historical inevitabilities akin to Nietzsche's concept of eternal return⁷. Deleuze elaborates on how memory changes the surfaces on which its traces reappear. "There is topology of reactive forces: it is their change of place, their displacement which constitutes *ressentiment*" (Deleuze: 114). Mannequins, "the dolls of dead childhood", are suspended between life and death. The play begins with Kantor attempting to bring back memories from his

⁷ The theory of Eternal Return appears in the aphorism 341 in *The Gay Science* written in 1882. It has been interpreted in multiple ways, e.g. referring to temporal structure of the universe, as a tool for individual examination, and as a parody of an individual's relation to the idea of fate and the desire for things to unfold on their own (*amor fati*).

childhood. The procession of dead students enters, and the school spectacle begins. The stretched ropes signify the line that divides the living from the dead (Plesniarowicz: 186). What follows is a multiplication of fictions, rather than the reconstruction of the past⁸. The dead students return again and again, carrying with them, or seated next to, their pale copies (“the dolls of dead childhood”). It is as if they initially wanted to resurrect all that was preserved on the photographs.

Allen Weiss writes about the *eternal return* in relationship to the development of recording techniques. The poetic intuition of eternal return corresponds to the displacement of linear temporality through technical innovation. “The elimination of temporality is a manifestation of the revenge of a strong poetic will, a reaction against time itself” (Weiss 2002: 73). A wave of Kantor’s hand introduces a waltz played from the loudspeaker. Kantor’s gestures invite musical motifs, which function as refrains, but do not lead towards expected resolution. His gestures perpetuate the chaotic return of the dead, the ghostly mixing of memories, and disallow the illusion of coherence and continuity. Kantor sets things in motion and then leaves them alone. For example, he initiates the rock of the “cradle-coffin”. He follows the disturbance that he has initiated with his eyes. As we become aware of his presence in the space, the events taking place become more like sensual occurrences, without any solid, unified meaning that we need to grasp. Things are separated, differentiated, and essentialized as pure and objective presences. The subject is caught in the play of formal rearrangements. Possible grand-finales are marginalized through repetitions, accidents, and adjustments by the director.

⁸ Krystof Plesniarowicz insists on the non-narrative nature of Kantor’s theater. “*The Theatre of Death* is conceived and staged exactly as the *inability* to resurrect drama, plot, characters and regions of memory, since their vestigial, partial life belongs among existences and events that have died, even if they have not yet been totally forgotten.” (2000:186).

These interruptions of the flow interfere with the habitual organization of memories into an overreaching meta-narrative. Gestures and exaggerated expressions of physicality are devoid of elaborate causality. There is a lack of psychological motivation. A man is pushing a bicycle with a child mannequin attached to it; another man keeps returning to the toilet, taking his pants off in advance; a woman with a mechanical cradle enters a ritualistic scene of delivery and later takes the two wooden balls out of the cradle; “dummy dialogues”⁹, consisting of disconnected phrases, happen on the outskirts of the space.

In 1907 Edward Gordon Craig in *The Actor and the Uber-Marionette* expressed great zeal for the abolition of the live actor. He wrote:

The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the Uber-marionette we may call him... The marionette appears to me to be the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilization (Craig: 161)

Thus, Craig demonstrates his romantic enchantment with the idealized puppets, possessing neither human flaws nor signs of fragility. Kantor is critical of Craig’s naïve desire to replace live actors with mannequins. He shares his interest in the artificiality, but is more concerned with the transgressive and the beguiling attributes of mannequins, than with their external perfection. In his manifesto Kantor asserts that these deceptive imitations of reality evade concepts of aesthetics. He writes:

I do not share the belief that the MANNEQUIN (or a WAX FIGURE) could replace a LIVE ACTOR... Its (mannequin’s) appearance complies with my ever-deepening conviction that it is possible to express *life* in art only through the *absence of life*, through an appeal to DEATH, through APPEARANCES, through EMPTINESS, and the lack of MESSAGE.

The MANNEQUIN in my theatre must become a MODEL, through which passes a strong sense of DEATH and the conditions of the DEAD. A model of the live ACTOR. (Kantor 1984: 254)

⁹ Kantor defined the kind of dialogue utilized in his theater as “dummy dialogue” (Plesniarowicz: 196).

Kantor sees the initial appearance, within a given play, of a live actor on stage as a revolutionary act, the point of break with the tradition of prescribed rituals, and predictable behaviors. The actor is a lonely figure, deceptively similar to those who watch him, and yet “infinitely FOREIGN, as if DEAD, cut off by an invisible barrier” (Kantor: 255). He finds it necessary to recover “the primeval force of the shock” that took place when the actor and the viewer first encountered each other.

Derrida criticizes the slavery of proper interpretation. He reminds us of the psychological, rationally inclined theater of the Enlightenment, which, through its conventions, produced passive, purely voyeuristic audiences. For him, the stage is theological as long as it is dominated by speech and the ideal of proper understanding of the author’s intention (Derrida: 235).

When Artaud inverts the common understanding of causal connection between art and life, by saying that it is not art that imitates life, but that “life is the imitation of the transcendental principle that art puts us in communication with”, he inaugurates the new form of theater, the theater of cruelty. “The theatrical practice of cruelty, in its action and structure, inhabits rather than *produces* a nontheological space” (Derrida 1978: 235)¹⁰. In *The Dead Class* actors create glossolalia; they de-familiarize the language through repetition and play with sounds out of fragmented chants, school lessons, political speeches, and absurd snippets of dialogues. An attempt to follow a single line of development proves futile. The gaps between interpretative directions, leading towards predictable dénouements become apparent. A new sight, a seemingly desolate area with

¹⁰ In *The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation* Derrida establishes the connection between language-based meaning and theological stage. He writes: “The stage is theological for as long as it is dominated by speech, by will to speech, by the layout of a primary logos which does not belong to the theatrical site and governs it from a distance.” (Derrida: 235)

no recognizable traces of definitive meanings and no stabilizing signifiers comes into being from the representational chaos created by Kantor. The space is not limited to its visual appearance anymore. It is a new kind of aural environment, inhabited with the multiplicity of expressive traits, and associative possibilities.

Kantor's theater is related to Artaud's. Representational symbols ironically reappear on Kantor's stage. Kantor jokingly demonstrates his awareness of theatrical conventions. The director is acting like a conductor, moving the actors as if they were instruments, using only subtle gestures of his hands. The simplicity of his staging denies the illusionary techniques employed by the grand theaters of the past, disrupting projections of psychological depth and coherent meaning onto to the perceived objects. Actors are seen as if in a distorted mirror, overdoing their characters without inventing anything new, as if the action itself was enough to disturb our sense of reality and annul any potential for normalizing the past. The cries, moans and laughter are produced again and again, divorced from comprehensive meaning or intentional organization into recognizable formal arrangements.

Both Artaud and Kantor broke with the Surrealist project of "poetic sublimation", proceeding to search for the intensity of the encounter with the repressed "real" in the space of theater. "Real" as I use it here is an ambiguous space without determinable references in the external world. The "real" evoked by Artaud and Kantor is disturbing, and has the potential to break the everyday organization of experience which aligns itself with normative structures of knowledge.

About *The Theatre and its Double*, Artaud's seminal work from 1938, Allen Weiss writes:

This was to be an antinaturalist, antirealist, antipsychological theater, where screams, cries, groans, and all the dissonant sounds of the human body would bear equal importance with spoken word, and where language itself would be utilized as a sort of incantation to create a theater of dramatic and curative magic. (Weiss: 279)¹¹

Kantor works primarily with his own memories, memories outside official historical accounts. The destructive force of his ensemble mirrors the destabilized subjectivity of the isolated human staging history as a collection of found objects. Actors do not attempt to be human, although they do not appear anything but simply human. They do not display any special skills; they embody residues, echoing the past effortlessly, without identification. Paradoxically, as the energy on the stage intensifies, the actors become animal-like, brutal in ignoring the aesthetic and ethical desires of a cultivated Western theater audience member. They create noise, indulge in violence and repeat their “mistakes” with passion.

The interiorization, corporealization, and ultimate destruction of lyricism entail a collapse of the temporality of nostalgia: the past becomes a function of the present, life and death are conflated, self and other condensed. This rejection of all transcendental theology and ontology (the condensation of all possible teleology into an archeology of forever lost origins) establishes a new, phantasmatic eroticism. (Weiss 2002: 197)

When Kantor died in 1990, an empty chair was placed on the stage in place where Kantor was supposed to sit (Kobialka: 1-2). Kantor wrote that in order “to see as it really is” one has to “become an object”. “The object that Kantor eventually, and one might say inevitably, became was a writing desk. His gravesite is adorned with his sculpture of himself as a ‘dead-class’ schoolboy seated at and bonded to a pen-scarred wooden writing desk” (Golub 1999). This conscious objectification of human subject dispenses

¹¹ From the article entitled: “Radio, Death, and the Devil”.

with the projections of psychological realism. Kantor becomes a memory object, surface for the play of light and shadow¹².

Kantor frequently combined history and autobiography in his work, attempting to save his presence from the official historical accounts. In the *The Dead Class*, his presence on stage, points to the absurdity of an attempt to restage one's own life. Memories escape the directives from above, reflecting the disorderly nature of modern subjectivity, and the unpredictability of the corporeal rhythms of recollection and forgetting¹³. In *The Dead Class*, Kantor, a literal presence in his theater, initiates a process of framing and reframing these corporeal expressions through aesthetic codes and references from shared and personal history, previous artistic representations, and literature. The author, a fictional autonomous individual, and a real physical and sculptural entity, enters the stage and, by participating in the happening of chaotic events, destabilizes the fiction of a completely independent subject. He returns the theatrical event back to its background the incomprehensible "real".

¹² In Chapter 2 "[missing]", subtitled "No Room" in *Infinity [Stage]* on pg. 41 Spencer Golub writes about found objects (*objets trouvés*) which transform into surfaces of recollection. The object itself reveals the texture, and "via texture, illumination itself".

¹³ Michel Kobialka in his article "Forget Kantor" explains that "Kantor himself disrupted any continuity by enforcing both the disintegration of this 'enchanted simulation' and of the space that fetishized the world". Based on Kantor's own observations on his role as someone disrupting the continuity of memory Kobialka writes:

A complete reconstruction of memory, and hence history, was impossible because the rhythm of forgetting and forgetting, thus birth and collapse, could accelerate the process of memory's and, thus, the Self's (dis)appearance. In other words, the process of restaging "life" commodified death into a ready-made, "a fragile and poetic emballage". (Kobialka 1994: 4)

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Video:

Umarla Klasa. First part: from 1989 from France. Interview with Tadeusz Kantor in French language and spectacle in Polish with French subtitles. 102 minutes