

TADEUSZ KANTOR

30th August – 16th November 2008

Tadeusz Kantor (born 1915 in Wielopole Skrzyńskie, died 1990 in Krakow) is one of the most significant Polish artists of the 20th century. Alongside his work as a visual artist he was also involved in the performing arts: he is regarded as a pioneering theatre reformer influenced by the ideas of avant-garde artists. Kantor was particularly interested in disrupting the illusion created by classical theatre, and aimed to break up the prevailing distancing engendered by the stage situation and open it up to real life. He was thus among those 20th-century artists who proclaimed and practised an open concept of art transgressing all its boundaries. The artist attained world renown in the 1970s with the travelling theatre group Cricot², which he established in the mid-1950s.

Instead of a traditional retrospective, structured according to periods and categories, the exhibition at the migros museum für gegenwartskunst is informed by a free scenic character, which attempts to exhibit Kantor's works as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This holistic concept held true for Kantor throughout his life: "Not the work – product is important, not its 'eternal' and rigid appearance – but the very process of creation which unblocks the mental and spiritual activities."¹ The focal point of the exhibition is the investigation of the performative, and the crossover between theatre and the visual arts. Thus it is a continuation of the content-discursive debate on current artistic interests in combination with and overlapping theatrical performative approaches in contemporary art, which has already been investigated in several previous exhibition projects. For the first time in Switzerland, the migros museum für gegenwartskunst offers a comprehensive overview of Kantor's versatility – from his theatre productions and actions to his painterly and sculptural works. Altogether more than sixty works are on show, created from the mid-1940s to the end of the 1980s.

As soon as his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow were completed in the 1930s, Kantor started to work as a visual artist, theatre director, stage designer and art and theatre theoretician. In his student years the publication *Die Bühne im Bauhaus* (The Stage in the Bauhaus) (1925) by Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy and Farkas Molnar had exercised a great influence over him and sparked his interest in constructivist theatre. The ideas of abstraction and the nature of the construction of a theatre production were reflected in his work over decades – based on Schlemmer's notion that the person on the stage should become a *Kunstfigur* (art figure). In 1937-1938 Kantor began his first theatre production phase under the title *Ephemeral Marionette Theatre*. This constructivist puppet theatre was in the tradition of the *Szopka*, miniature nativity plays that were widespread in Eastern Europe in particular. Thereafter puppets and marionettes continually cropped up in Kantor's productions: by using puppets or marionettes Kantor dispensed with the individual and presented an emptied, de-psychologised body in the foreground in which, however, all archetypal traits of human existence could be manifested. In his best-known play *The Dead Class* (1975), which began the phase of production that produced the *Theatre of Death* – a series of plays in which Kantor was preoccupied with dying including ever more frequently the frightening vision of his own death – Kantor again used the intensive impact of puppets. Just like Schlemmer, Kantor made a link between his theatre and the characters of carnival theatre and the circus, which are regarded as his models. With his works in visual art and theatre that transcend categories, Kantor set out to develop a form of theatre the deliberate purposelessness and lack of intentionality of which have to be understood in the sense of maximum possible "autonomy".

The production of *The Dead Class* (1975) is Kantor's best-known stage play, inspired by Witkacy's play *Tumor Hirnowicz* (1920). Witkacy (Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz) is regarded as the "enfant terrible" of the Polish avant-garde, and on the basis of a number of dramas written in the 1920s as a forerunner of the theatre of the absurd. Following Witkacy's suicide in 1939 his work was initially forgotten, and was only rediscovered by Kantor in the mid-1950s when it was made known to a wider public. Some of his texts as well as his thoughts on art theory were used by Kantor, and fragments of them went into his own plays. *The Dead Class* is not based on a concrete action, but is generated more from ritual acts, dynamics derived from movement and standing still, structured by the constantly

¹ Non-published typescript, ed. Daniel F. Simpson, Archive of Cricoteka.

repeating musical motif, the *Valse François* by Zygmunt Krasiński. The production can be described as a mixture of a play, a happening with biographical references, and an installation sculpture. The visualisation of memories is at its centre. As throughout his work, Kantor's private childhood recollections are mingled with core themes from the cultural memory of the 20th century, such as the two World Wars and the destruction of the Jewish culture that left its mark on the Polish culture of the postwar period. The starting point of Kantor's play is the view through a window into a schoolroom. Again and again, to symbolise this initial idea, a cloudy, dirty old window is held up in the air by an actress. Through it memories surge up and disappear again. The class consists of grey-haired actors in suits reminiscent of school uniforms. The faces in white make-up look strangely inanimate and marionette-like. Throughout the play each figure is accompanied by a marionette of his/her own self as a child. The alter egos made of wax serve as a medium giving access to the memories. Squeezed on to an old school bench, the actors who are not acting but have to be present intermittently look as inanimate as the puppets. As far as possible Kantor was present at every production of the play – he was also always himself present on the stage in person in the travelling theatre Cricot² (from 1956). Like a director or a master of ceremonies he gave the actors of *The Dead Class* instructions and signs, shook his head or made some comment. He thus watched over his world created on the stage as a demiurge. Until 1986 the play was produced in two different versions, in 1989, on the occasion of the Kantor Festival at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, yet another version was created which takes place without the director's presence and also continues to be performed after his death. Over a period of more than ten years Kantor repeatedly altered, used and redeployed the material in *The Dead Class*. Thus in the exhibition the painting *School Class (from the series "The Dead Class II")* (1983) as well as the sculptural props, *Manikin of a Child on a Bike (from the play "The Dead Class")* (1975) and *Children at Their Desk (from the play "The Dead Class")* (1989), can be seen. Andrzej Wajda's film named after the play was made in 1976 at the Krzysztofory Gallery where *The Dead Class* also has had its premiere.

The production that followed it, *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), likewise comes under the *Theatre of Death* creative phase. It came into being in Florence, where the Cricot² ensemble spent a year at the invitation of the city council working on the play. Here again Kantor goes directly back to his own life and conjures up memories from his childhood. The play is not based on an own literary text, but is interspersed with snippets from the Old Testament. Structurally the production takes the form of the five acts used in classical Greek tragedy. Various stations or stages of a family history are narrated: a poor family is overtaken by the events of war, the parents' wedding is destroyed by rape and death. The family's host also dies and a young relative is sent to the front. The family foregathers for a celebratory meal, in spite of misery and death, and the dead people are not missing there either. The construction of the play consisting of "stations" is reminiscent of the Passion of Christ, and there are recognizable similarities to mediaeval Passion plays. As in *The Dead Class* the speech in the play is characterised in places by almost ritual recitations, repetitions and quotations. There are only vestiges of a comprehensible language remaining. Here the staging of memory, its pulsating and flow, not least with the aim of gaining knowledge of the structure of human memory, is just as central. In the exhibition the 1984 film recording by Andrzej Sapija as well as the object *A Funerary Vehicle* (1980) that comes from the original production are shown. Michael Kluth's documentary film *Die Familie aus Wielopole* delivers insight into the rehearsals of the play in Florence over a period of several weeks.

Between the two major *Theatre of Death* productions Kantor staged several so-called *Cricotages*, studies or sketches for the larger plays. His first Cricotage, *Where Are the Snows of Yesterday* (1979), was inspired by a 15th-century ballad by the late mediaeval vagabond and troubadour François Villon. The stage action is divided into ten sequences – in a few words they outline or comment on the actions taking place. A group of figures emerges, including a Rabbi, his pupil, a bride, an artist and two Cardinals. In a straight line, at right angles to the audience, a rope is stretched across the stage. The alignment is measured by the figure of the *Great Geometrician*. Twins, dressed in identical white work overalls, observe a figure busy packing a cardboard box. The artist drags the bride along the floor parallel to the outstretched rope. A long, white paper track is installed on the stage by the company, parallel to the rope. Slowly the bride lying on the floor is covered by it. The play ends with the image of the white "snow-covered" bride who remains on the stage alone with Kantor. Kantor lets himself be pulled into the dark wings off stage on the rope. The Cricotage consists primarily of actions and manages almost without words. It was produced on the occasion of an exhibition of Kantor's paintings, stage sets and costumes, as well as pictures by other painters who belonged to the Cricot² ensemble. Its function as a sketch is relevant not only in this exhibition's context, but also in respect of the fact that figure constellations and types are created in the play that are picked up again in *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980) and *Let the Artists Die* (1985).

The *Machine of Love and Death* (1987), produced by the Centro Ricerche Teatrali in Milan and Antonio Pasqualino, director of the Museo Internazionale delle Marionette in Palermo, is another major Cricotage. The production, premiered at the theatre festival in Kassel, consists of two different parts. In the first part the play alludes with various references to Kantor's creative output up to that point, and picks up on the constructivist approaches from his first phase of theatrical creativity. It refers to his early staging of Maurice Maeterlinck's puppet play *The Death of Tintagiles* (1937 and/or 1938). In the Cricotage death is present as an abstract and symbolistically exaggerated demon. The outsize marionettes represent maidservants sent in advance by death. The second part is completely different both visually and rhythmically – death is no longer personified, but celebrated. A “poor, delicate human child” appears behind the gate. Several marriage and burial ceremonies are held, as it were. At some point the actions and the music come to a halt. At the end Kantor remains alone on the stage. He tends a seemingly dead creature called *Unknown Model*, lying on a bier between two candles and swathed in a black cloth. When Kantor undoes the wrapping round the Unknown Model, a beautiful young woman is revealed – she is the figure *Death's Bride*, who crops up again and again in various guises in the last major productions by the Cricot² ensemble. The second part of the Cricotage represents a staged manifesto of the *Theatre of Death*. The stage set of *Machine of Love and Death* consists of the sculptural installation of the same name, which is shown in the exhibition as an autonomous work of art.

Handling and playing with different materials became a central focus in Kantor's work. Around 1962 he discovered *Emballage* as a new medium and started wrapping up various objects – these were ordinary everyday objects, but also intimate objects that had a private memory-related value. In 1962 when staying at the studio of the collector Theodor Ahrenberg in Switzerland he wrote the *Emballage Manifesto*, first published in 1964. For Kantor the process of wrapping up in the widest variety of materials – paper, tulle, paint, sacks, bags, suitcases – involved “the human need / and the human passion, / for hoarding things, / isolating them, / hiding them, / passing them on”.² The emballages were also a new form of making things visible, they played with the “emotional possibilities” of hope, expectation and premonition. By virtue of the performative character of the emballages his work slots into the avant-gardist European happening culture. In parallel with his theatre productions, from the mid-1960s on, after returning from a trip to the United States, Kantor began to organize discrete happenings. He perceived these as games with authenticity and reality. Through the arrangements and role allocations they are reminiscent of the constellations of children's games. “Mastering the object” and plumbing the boundaries of art were likewise a possibility. Happening photographs taken by Eustachy Kossakowski (1925–2001) who made a photograph record of Kantor's artistic creative work for decades are being shown for the first time in the context of this exhibition.

The title of his first happening organized in the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw, *First Happening: Cricotage* (1965), is a pun referring to the Cricot² theatre and is intended to set it apart from the usual concepts of the happening or performance. This first happening deals with everyday activities that have been removed from their real purpose. Various strange actions occur in the room simultaneously. In one corner of the room a naked girl is lying with a frozen smile, a semi-naked man is shaking coal over the dead-looking girl until she slowly disappears under the pile. Two gentlemen are sitting at a table, stuffing themselves with spaghetti from a suitcase overflowing with it. The pasta is spread right across the stage and also over the audience. Porters laden with luggage keep crossing the room, and a woman is wrapped up into an *Emballage Humain* (human parcel). The happening *The Letter* (1967) likewise took place at the Foksal Gallery. Seven genuine, elderly postmen in post office uniform drag a huge letter measuring 14 x 2 metres addressed to the Foksal Gallery through the streets of Warsaw. The audience waits in a room of the gallery that has been painted black. Reports from posts stationed along the route regarding the whereabouts of the letter come in regularly. As the letter draws nearer to its destination information about its progress pours in until the postmen finally push through the throng of people with the gigantic delivery. The voice of an unknown recipient of the letter is heard – full of horror he reports on the arrival of the outsize item of mail. Prompted by this text some of those present read aloud from their personal letters. At the close of the happening those participating in it destroy the letter by trampling it underfoot, tearing it and cutting it up.

Kantor orchestrated the happening *Rembrandt's Anatomy Lesson* several times from 1968 on in different contexts. Rembrandt's famous painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp* (1692) is re-enacted by those taking part. Kantor took on the role of Dr. Tulp. Layer by layer the clothing of an outstretched patient is removed, taken to pieces or cut up. While Kantor empties the jacket pockets he gives a speech explaining his propensity for paying attention to the strange small items that he finds: buttons,

² “Emballage” manifesto quoted after: Institut für moderne Kunst Nürnberg (pub.), *Tadeusz Kantor. Er war sein Theater*, Nuremberg 2005.

shanks, scraps of paper, an egg, toothbrushes, playing cards, keys, etc. In conclusion Kantor makes assemblages from the found objects and the remaining clothes by gluing and nailing them on to wooden panels.

One of Kantor's best-known happenings is *Sea Concert* (1967) which belongs to the quadripartite *Panoramic Sea Happening* that took place on the Baltic Sea coast at Lazy near Osiek. A conductor, played by Edward Krasiński, one of the most important figures on the Polish art scene of the 1960s and 1970s, stands on a podium located in the water with his back to the beach and conducts towards the expanse of the sea. The "wave symphony" is supplemented by a "motorbike fugue": at a sign from the conductor, five motorbikes tear along the beach half submerged in the water. At a further sign from his right hand a spluttering tractor approaches. The conductor fires off a shot from a signal pistol, whereupon a lifeboat with a screaming siren appears on the horizon. In the finale the conductor throws a big bucket of dead fish in the direction of the public and takes off his tail-coat. The performance *The Raft of the Medusa* also belongs to the *Panoramic Sea Happening* (1967). It is a replica of a painting by Théodore Géricault from 1818, which depicts a real maritime disaster of 1816. To illustrate the catastrophe as realistically as possible Géricault visited different hospitals where dying patients and corpses served him as models for his painting. Kantor was fascinated by the detailed research Géricault had undertaken and in his happening he convinced people haphazardly passing on the beach to re-enact Géricault's painting. Among those passing reproductions of the painting were distributed and a contest was arranged looking for the best re-enactment of the picture. At the same time a participating artist continually walks in the shape of a circle as a cord around his neck ties him to a wooden stake in the sand. This ritual repetition is supposed to "prepare the virtual process" of the happening and to "liberate the own personality". In *Horticulture on Sand*, another part of the *Panoramic Sea Happening*, newspapers and magazines are being planted into the sand at the beach. The fourth part of the series is called *An Erotic Mess*: Volunteers are coated with sand that sticks to their naked bodies with the help of a mixture made from oil, tomato juice and starch flour. They roll through the sand creating an "epileptical rhythm". Finally the happening concludes with *The Immersion* when a large box with the name of the Foksal Gallery inscribed on it is seemingly carried away in order to save it. The audience thus falsely believes that the mysterious box contains important documents of the happening's organizer. On a boat the box is taken to the open sea where it is thrown into the water at a sign of a signal pistol.

Kossakowski documented not only happenings, but also other forms of production. In parallel with developing his happenings Kantor worked with the Cricot² ensemble on productions that he grouped together under the concept of *Theatre of Events*. In his staging of *The Water-Hen* (1967) emballages again crop up as a motif. The stage area was determined by storage utensils like cases, rucksacks or coats with lots of pockets among other things. Random and everyday events are staged along with the text of the play that is based on Witkacy to create an independent theatrical act.

Alongside his performative and theatre work, Kantor had also been active as a visual artist since the beginning of his artistic career. Initially he attracted even more attention with his paintings, collages and drawings than with his stage work. His oeuvre can be put into the context of various tendencies of avant-garde art, with Kantor differentiating and delimiting his work by means of his own concepts. In the mid-1940s he painted and drew an abstracted and alienated representation of people doing everyday things. Kantor called the style "cubising realism" – he was intrigued by the suggestiveness of art which in his opinion should be constructed consciously. Abstraction was the best method for achieving that desired effect. Towards the end of the 1940s a series of "metaphorical pictures" began. They are drawings and oil paintings with representations of generally deformed human figures. In the mid-1950s Kantor founded the Krakow Group, also known as the 2nd Krakow Group, which was committed to an *informel* style of painting. Inspired by Abstract Expressionism, but also by artists of French Art Informel like Wols or Georges Mathieu, the coming into being of the painting which is a process of growing awareness became the central focus of interest. Kantor was increasingly interested in relief and said goodbye to the idea that art could "represent" something. Rather than the result, in painting as well as in his theatre productions the process moved into the foreground. Kantor supported the idea of the process-oriented method with theoretical concepts about the "Development of art".

Meanings of particular objects are often revealed only in the total connectedness of Kantor's work. In the context of the production *In a Little Manor House* (1961) after Witkacy, for example, Kantor speaks of an *informel theatre*, an attempt to "transpose the language of painting to the theatre". The objects deployed on stage are wretched, worn-out, or appear to come from a rubbish dump. The costumes should come into being through actions in which the actors are actively involved – they are pulled

through the mire, battered, smeared or burnt. No longer adorning the actors' bodies the costumes thus become objects or paintings instead of empty envelopes. But the language of the theatre is in return also transposed to visual art. His photomontages in the series *Impossible Architecture Projects* (1970) are Surrealist architectonic arrangements. Squares in Krakow are occupied by outsize everyday objects, a chair, an electric bulb or a clothes hanger, and become a form of proposal for a stage set.

Again and again the processual and the constant reversion to and repetition of certain, specific objects, fragments and themes are a problem area in Kantor's creative work. Items and objects which Kantor installed on the stage and already used even before his happening period cannot be described as "props" in the traditional sense, but more as sculptural-performative objects that occupy place in the productions equivalent to that of the actors. Central to his work is the notion of "Reality of lowest status". Poor and generally not valued objects taken from reality are turned into protagonists on stage. Kantor also calls these objects "objets trouvés"; they are not meant to represent reality but to bring real life into the theatre. Today they are autonomous works of art, irrespective of whether they were used as originals in the productions, or made subsequently as copies by Kantor himself. Take for example the sculpture *The Aneantisating Machine*, which comes from Kantor's staging of Witkacy's most frequently performed play, *The Madman and the Nun* (1963) and was renovated in the early 1980s. The play is a parody of modern psychology and the central focus of the action is the love story between the mad poet Waldburg and the young psychiatric nurse Anna. At the centre of the play is the so-called aneantisating machine which dominates the events on the stage and the actors' role play: it relentlessly rattles and thinks in Waldburg's head and drives him to the verge of madness. The play is central to Kantor's creative work as he here used the principle of repetition for the first time which was later to become the important method of structuring in the *Theatre of Death*. The object *Goplana and Elves* is derived from the play *Balladyna* (1943, after Juliusz Słowacki), and was reconstructed by Kantor in 1984; likewise the sculptures *The Sink* (1985) or *The Little Cart* (1985) come from the play *Let the Artists Die* (1985) which again has themes associated with death as its central focus and is reminiscent of mediaeval dances of death (*danses macabres*). The object *The Rubbish Cart* (1981/1983) is a recreation from *In a Little Manor House* (1961, after Witkacy), a crazy family story revolving round the spirit of a dead mother conjured up by her daughters and their love lives.

Alongside the photographs of Kossakowski the exhibition is accompanied by documentary films and private archive material from the Ahrenberg collection. These documents again highlight the processual aspect of Kantor's creative work. His work does not end with the object or the production, but likewise consists of its documentation, in which the boundaries between staging and objectivity, fiction and reality continually shift. The institution Cricoteka came into being in 1980 at Kantor's own initiative, and he himself began to develop it into an archive of his work. At the same time as the archive was founded he began to revise his texts. A process of the rewriting but also the blurring of history began – even the archiving of his own work became the processual component of a total work of art. His conceptual decision to regard all props and costumes from the time with Cricot² as autonomous artworks was also taken at this period. The fact that Kantor is increasingly adopted as a reference in a contemporary art context indicates the topicality of his creative work. His hybrid way of working with different media, the processual character, forms of self-staging and stylisation as well as the self-archiving and historicisation relate to core themes of contemporary art production.

A comprehensive catalogue of the exhibition will be appearing, publishing Kantor's main works, unpublished drawings and paintings, but also for the first time Eustachy Kossakowski's photographs documenting Kantor's happenings. For further information see: www.migrosmuseum.ch

Public guided tours: Sundays: 31st August, 21st & 28th September, 12th & 26th October, 16th November at 3 pm; and Thursdays: 11th September and 6th November, at 6.30 pm. **Family tour:** Sunday, 14th September at 1.30 pm

Opening hours: Tues / Mon / Fri Midday–6 pm, Thurs Midday–8 pm, Sat / Sun 11 am–5 pm. Museum entrance on Thursdays between 5 pm and 8 pm is free.

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