

Not To Be «Looked At»! Reality and Unreality in Kantor's Aesthetics of Theatre

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ABSTRACT: Universally regarded as one of the twentieth century's most subversive *pièces*, the *Dead Class* epitomises Tadeusz Kantor's concept of what theatre (and, more generally, art) could and should be. In the attempt to eliminate any distance between the stage and the auditorium, between actors and spectators, the Polish artist reflected on how to do away with the traditional distinction between the reality of everyday life and the (alleged) unreality of theatrical performances. Staging daily and trivial objects played a crucial role in this artistic strategy. Kantor was fascinated, in particular, by hyperrealistic dummies which seem to have more to do with *Wunderkammern* and fairground booths than with so-called «high» art. By focusing on the *material* the *Dead Class* mannequins are made of (namely, wax), the article delves deep into Kantor's essays and manifestos, exploring the theoretical reasons underlying his aesthetics of theatre.

KEY WORDS: Kantor, Hyperrealism, Phenomenology, Unreality, Wax mannequins, Bio-Objects.

¡Para no ser «contemplado»! Lo real y lo irreal en la estética del teatro de Kantor

RESUMEN: Universalmente reconocida como una de las obras más subversivas del siglo XX, *La clase muerta* ejemplifica el concepto de lo que, según Tadeusz Kantor, podría y debería ser el teatro (y, más en general, el arte). En el intento de eliminar toda distancia entre escenario y auditorio, entre actores y espectadores, el artista polaco reflexionó sobre cómo eliminar la distinción tradicional entre la realidad cotidiana y la (presunta) irrealidad de las actuaciones teatrales. La puesta en escena de objetos triviales y cotidianos desempeñó un papel crucial en esta estrategia artística. A Kantor le fascinaban, en particular, los maniquíes hiperrealistas que parecen tener más que ver con *Wunderkammern* y casetas de feria que con el «arte elevado». Centrándose en el material del que están hechos los maniquíes de *La clase muerta* (en concreto, la cera), este artículo profundiza en los ensayos y manifiestos de Kantor, para explorar las razones teóricas que subyacen a su estética del teatro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Kantor, Hiperrealismo, Fenomenología, Irrealidad, Maniquíes de cera, Bio-objetos.

Krakow, November 15, 1975. Between the Krzysztofory Gallery's claustrophobic brick walls, plunged into the dark, cavernous depths of a windowless medieval basement, Tadeusz Kantor's *Dead Class* premieres. Unceremoniously sitting on simple and rather uncomfortable chairs, the audience is stunned by an enigmatically bleak scene consisting of a few rows of modest wooden school benches. Defining it as a «set design» seems to be an exaggeration, for the wings are nothing more than the naked room's walls, and the performance space is separated from the auditorium by a mere rope suspended on poles, last bastion of the traditional division between stage and auditorium. A poor, inconsistent, and essentially self-negating bastion, though, as it suggests the exact opposite of what it should be intended for: it sets boundaries which it cannot (and even does not want to) protect; it draws a demarcation line while, at the same time, it encourages to cross it; it erects what is supposed to be an impassable barrier, but no safety system has ever been easier to bypass.

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A few benches and a rope to change the fate of contemporary theatre. Humble and trivial objects selected by Kantor precisely because of their seemingly so unattractive features. The purpose is clear: to bring unusual and disorienting nuances to everyday, well-known, and even banal things, thus modifying the meaning of the whole representation and, more generally, of the concept of theatrical art itself. Removing objects from their original contexts, depriving them of their ordinary functions and giving their physical existence a meta-physical value – this is what the Polish theatre reformer aims at:

To me, an object became a sign for the problem of boundaries in art. [...] An object, alien and undefinable by our minds, is fascinating. The desire to possess it and all attempts to imitate it or represent it are futile and vain. It must be «touched» in a different manner. This process – this *ritual* – is childishly simple: the object must be wrenched from its life's conditions and functions, left alone without a description that would give it a meaning: it must be left *alone* (Kantor, 1993: 72).

The *Dead Class* is this ritual, this *séance dramatique*, as the work's subtitle sounds like. The word *séance* conveys the idea of carrying out, of developing, of a work in progress. In its evident psychoanalytical connotation it refers to an intense, demanding activity. More precisely: a *shared* activity. We *attend* theatre performances, but we *participate* and are *involved* in a *séance*. By ritually manipulating all-too-familiar objects, Kantor emphasises the performative and vital essence of theatre, stressing how important it is to get the audience directly and concretely involved in the stage play, making it an integral part of a spectacle which should have nothing to do with a passive and leisurely *spectare*.

Within this context, the humblest objects turn out to be also the most suited to erase that distance which seems to be – as Moritz Geiger (1913: 632) already pointed out – an essential condition of possibility for contemplation and aesthetic enjoyment: «While contemplating a painting, a landscape, the features of a man, a poem, or a symphony, there is always a distance between the I and the object». Kantor's attempt is precisely to prevent the audience from merely contemplating the theatrical pieces with a distant and detached attitude, as if they were looking at something unfolding in a radically different (i.e. fictional, unreal) space

and time – something that could not concern or even affect them: «A theatre piece should not be “looked at”!» (Kantor, 1942-1944: 37). Trying to eliminate any distance between the concrete reality of the auditorium and the audience on the one hand and the particular «unreality» (we shall return to this expression further ahead) of staging and acting on the other, Kantor tirelessly challenges the traditional idea of theatre as a mere pastime and entertainment. He aims to cross the threshold between the stage and the audience, between the fictional realm of the drama and the physical reality of the theatre in which the drama is being performed: «The creation of reality, which is as concrete as the auditorium, rather than the creation of illusion, which makes the audience feel safe, should be the ultimate goal on stage. The drama on stage must be *created*, rather than *take place*. It must *develop* in front of the audience. The *drama is being created*» (Kantor, 1942-1944: 37).

The choice of «poor objects» (Kantor, 1963: 74), which we are all well-accustomed to by virtue of repetitious and monotonous use, is intended to bring out their latent semantic potentialities and unusual symbolic meanings, which can appear only through a truly *creative* act. To both actors and spectators – terms which Kantor, significantly, does not like, as he prefers to consider them «players» (Bablet, 1977: 23) – the «spectacle» should always concern our everyday life, not the imaginary life of the characters of a drama supposed to be mimetically translated into the visual «language» of the scene: *we*, and not alleged others, are personally involved in the play.

Kantor's fierce dispute against sophisticated stage designs, costumes, and a theatre which «protrudes uselessly from concrete reality» is rooted in the conviction that true art is only achievable «by including the reality of fiction in the reality of life». The image should be intermingled with reality, or rather the (alleged) scene fiction should give way to a new form of reality – the theatrical reality, in which nothing separates the actors from the audience: «Drama is reality. All that happens in drama is real and true» (Kantor, 1942-1944: 34-36). This struggle against naturalism as a flat reproduction of reality, espoused by Kantor and applied to the field of performative arts, culminates in the conception of an «autonomous theatre» capable of overcoming the tedious tautology and the mediocre illustration of a merely mimetic art.

Silence in the hall. It is showtime. When looking at the actors entering the stage, at those old people slowly taking their seats on those school benches which in the past had been theirs (or, more precisely, *could* have been theirs), the audience feels there is no border or distance anymore between themselves and the actors: we look at the others, but we see ourselves as if reflected in a mirror, and that classroom suddenly becomes *our* classroom, those dusty books lying abandoned on the floor and written in who knows what language become *our* books, above and beyond any possible difference. *We* are the students who are asked questions, *we* are the ones raising the hands to answer: *we* are the dead class. We can remember those youthful days in which everything seemed to be timeless because we have lived them as well, because even before the individual memory of that particular child there is the memory of *the* child *tout-court* – a memory which knows neither first names nor surnames, a *mythical* memory, «since, after all, the typical is the mythical», to quote Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers* (1942: 6).

Thus, instead of memories, it would be more appropriate to speak of re-evocations: what really counts is not whether we have ever been asked the same questions in the past, whether our benches had precisely the same form and colour as in Kantor's play or whether our classroom walls were similarly made of bare bricks. Instead, what matters here most is the very fact that we as well were once asked, sat on a school bench and had a classroom. While attending the *Dead Class*, the questions we hear, the classroom benches and the walls we look at, remind us of the questions we were once asked, of the benches we once sat on, and of the walls we once looked at in moments of distraction. It matters little whether or not we remember them exactly, whether or not we are able to recall the precise questions we were unable to answer, or whether or not we can still say what colour our benches were; what is crucial is that the particular questions, the particular benches, and the particular walls of Kantor's *Dead Class* act as *images*, i.e. as reference structures capable of presentifying whom (or what) is not present anymore. The analogical power of images – their distinctive as-if quality – lies in the ability to evoke the absents, to make them present, to presentify them. And the absents, in Kantor's play, are no one but ourselves, those children in a class which died long ago, and which can be re-evoked precisely because of its being dead.

Pondering on the notion of *présentification*, Jean-Pierre Vernant claims that the communication between the living and the dead requires:

A «grasp» of the person [...], some means to act upon it. If the person is not physically present, then one can operate through the mediation of «substitutes» or «equivalents» which presentify the person in a concretely manipulable form, even when it does not belong to this world anymore. Without resembling him, the equivalent is capable of presenting someone, of taking his place in the game of social exchanges. It does so not by virtue of similarity with the external aspect of the person (as in a portrait), but through a sharing in «value», a concordance in the matter of qualities tied to prestige (Vernant, 1990: 75).

A means is needed to make the absents present, to evoke the dead through a certain «sharing in "value"». Then the class suddenly empties, the elderly students disappear somewhere behind the scenes, before finally reappearing on stage from the depths of their memory, which are the depths of our own memory as well:

They are all carrying small children, like little corpses... Some of these are swaying inertly, clinging with a desperate movement, hanging, trailing, as if they were the remorse of conscience, curling up at the actors' feet, as if creeping over these metamorphosed specimens... human creatures unashamedly exhibiting the secrets of their past... with the crescences of their own childhood (Kantor, 1983: 36) [1].

It is the *grande entrée* of the famous *Dead Class* mannequins: «bio-objects», as Kantor defines them, perfectly suited to act as means of evocation, as they are ambiguous and even paradoxical in being neither objects nor subjects, or rather, enigmatically, objects *and* subjects at the same time. These dummies re-presenting – i.e. presentifying – children from the past seem to be symbiotic with the worn-out funeral clothes of the old people carrying them: «They are the larvae of those old people, they store up their entire memory of childhood, rejected and forgotten out of indifference, because of the remorseless practicality of everyday life, which deprives us of the means of grasping our lives as a whole» (Kantor, 2002: 42-43).

Rather than just «accompanying» their alter egos, Kantor's mannequins are – literally – as *one* with them: inextricably linked together, old and young people, puppets and real human beings form an indissoluble whole which prevents any distinction whatsoever between them. What is paramount is that the mannequins give the impression of being «like a nonmaterial extension, a kind of additional organ for the actors, who are their “masters”» (Kantor, 1975: 111); the actors do not just carry the children, they *are* themselves the children. What is at stake is the concept of an image which is undistinguishable from its referent: Kantor's actor carries on stage, attached to his body, «not his replicant, but rather a perceivable, memorial prosthesis of what he has been as well as what he could be – a possible form of existence. Not his double, but rather his constitutively missing part» (Cappelletto, 2010: 132). Mannequins are bio-objects insofar as they merge together two incongruent elements: an inorganic thing and a living being. If the puppets are additional organs of the actors, the converse is also true, as the actors become organs of the puppets. The main issue is no longer to distinguish between carrier and carried, but to understand that such a distinction is in principle impossible, as the mannequins are not just *similar*, but rather *identical* to men. The notion of similarity gives way to that of identity.

This inevitably leads the audience to ask who actually are the mannequins: «Who are more concrete, real, living», the puppets or the actors? (Bablet, 1977: 30) It cannot go unnoticed that the actors, too, once blended together with their artificial counterparts, begin to move in a stiff and clearly mechanical way, always repeating the same jerky gestures and monotonous actions as if they were forced to do so because of a compulsion which is typical of marionettes more than human beings. To support this argument, we could examine one of the main characters in the *Dead Class*, the somnambulist prostitute who, as a child, «pretended to be a shop-window model, a licentious mannequin often standing naked publicly» (Kantor, 1983: 36), and who, once grown up, has become a proper mannequin performing on the stage of a theatre or (which to Kantor is the same) of life. The paradoxical identity between object and person is also stressed by Kantor's idea that actors, being «deceptively similar to us, yet at the same time infinitely foreign, beyond an impassable barrier» (1975: 114), are similar to corpses: both are like us,

both are perfect images of ourselves, and yet this proximity hints at an unbridgeable distance and difference – that distance, that difference which is the condition of possibility of the image itself¹.

Kantor's «Theatre of Death» is based on the conviction that «the concept of life can be vindicated in art only through the absence of life in its conventional sense» (Kantor, 1975: 110). If in Kantor's poetics of the bio-objects «the actor is what the objects makes him, that is an object» (Romanska, 2004: 272), the opposite also holds true, i.e. the object – in this case, the mannequin – is what the actor makes it, that is, a subject. Physically hampered by the mannequin, the actor is forced to unnatural, mechanical movements which make him look like an automaton. Conversely, the mannequin, thanks to the symbiosis with its bearer, gains what it was still lacking, that is, the ability to move. The living suddenly becomes dead, whereas the dead suddenly acquires the features of the living: *unheimlich*, as Ernst Jentsch called (over a decade before Sigmund Freud's famous essay on *The Uncanny*) the feeling elicited by a disturbing confusion about the animate or inanimate nature of what we are looking at. Jentsch explicitly linked the uncanny to aesthetics when he remarked that «true art, in wise moderation, avoids the absolute and complete imitation of nature and living beings, well knowing that such an imitation can easily produce uneasiness» (Jentsch, 1906: 12). The unpleasant impression is prompted by a «lack of orientation» (1906: 8) which makes it impossible to decide if we are standing in front of a statue or a real person, thus causing disorientation and rising above the doubt «as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate» (1906: 11)².

Mentioning the notion of *unheimlich* as elaborated by both Jentsch and Freud is not irrelevant: the former emphasizes that «the truer to nature the formal reproduction, the more strongly will the uncanny effect also make its appearance» (Jentsch, 1906: 12), whereas the latter, as a corollary to Jentsch's argument, gives the example of wax figures, which illustrate the concept of *unheimlich* because of their ability to make depiction concretely indistinguishable from reality: «An uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality» (Freud, 1919: 636). This



1. T. Kantor, *The Dead Class. The rope and «bio-objects»*. © Jan Dalman. Cricoteka Archive

statement perfectly fits Kantor's project of breaking down the barriers which separate the reality of life from the (alleged) unreality of theatre plays.

Within this context, it also becomes immediately clear why Kantor resorts to such an unusual material as wax in order to build up his mannequins. In fact, this choice is dictated by Kantor's idea of the enigmatic nature of all objects, particularly those of the lowest rang:

Only the reality of the lowest order, the poorest and least prestigious objects, is capable of revealing its full objectivity in a work of art. Mannequins and wax figures have always existed on the peripheries of sanctioned Culture. They were not admitted further; they occupied places in fair booths, suspicious magician's chambers, far from the splendid shrines of art, treated condescendingly as curiosities intended for the tastes of the masses. For precisely this reason, it was they, and not academic, museum creations, which caused the curtain to move at the blink of an eye (Kantor, 1975: 111).

These words immediately call to mind Julius von Schlosser's *History of Portraiture in Wax*, a pioneering work which had traced, from both a historical and a theoretical point a view, the vicissitudes of «a branch of art that in our day is all but confined to a single specialization, one almost wholly sundered from the realm of "Art" as we know it, namely the formally defined and valuable expression of an individual personality through technical ability; the specialization to which I refer is found in such places as fairground booths, barbershops, tailor shops» (Schlosser, 1911: 173). In order to correctly evaluate the meaning and importance of Schlosser's masterpiece it is essential to realise the courage of its author and the difficulties he had to face: a few years after the turn of the twentieth century, one of the most illustrious art historians of the renowned «Wiener Schüle» decided to focus on the history and value of ceroplastics, a topic which seems definitely related to crafts and mere technical curiosity rather than to art. Schlosser was able to grasp and show the extraordinary potentialities of such a neglected material as

wax – those potentialities which had already been exploited over the centuries by both artisans and artists, and which Schlosser (erroneously)³ thought were completely exhausted at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Kantor's notion of theatre is based on the very similar attempt to give new life to objects of the lowest order, that is, objects which are aesthetically disregarded, but precisely for this reason are best suited to redraw the only seemingly stable boundaries between what should be considered art and what should not. The selection of such objects suits the idea of a radically new form of theatre in which any trace of fiction has disappeared and the distance between art and life is reduced to zero.

The question of the indistinguishability between images and reality leads us to another crucial point regarding Kantor's choice of using wax as an artistic material. Wax allows an extremely high degree of adherence to the models portrayed: it is characterized by «a viscosity, a sort of *activity* and intrinsic force, which is a force of metamorphism, polymorphism, imperviousness to contradiction» (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 155). Wax proves to be the ideal substance to make the audience doubt of being able to find a difference, however small it may be, between appearance and reality. Thanks to their disturbing hyperrealism and their ability to perfectly reproduce the skin in (almost) all its subtlest shades and details, Kantor's mannequins challenge the traditional idea of «representation», thus raising the suspicion that the images are not «just images», objects, or mere things, but that they actually concern the life itself of the models, of the originals. Or even that the images *are* the models, and that there are no originals at all behind or beyond them. The images blend with the real persons, meant as both the actors carrying the wax mannequins and the audience, which find themselves directly, personally involved in the representation [2].

Here we are dealing with that «indecisive nature of the boundaries between the artistic and the living» which another great theatre theorist, the phenomenologist José Ortega y Gasset (1921: 188) has discussed. Schlosser (1911: 176) had already used similar words: «That the work of art, and the portrait in particular, are alive is of course one of the most primitive conceits (*conceit*), one that naive minds confronted with an artistic creation will in general most readily and easily adopt». However, whereas the use of the word «naive» reveals Schlosser's anxiety to consider culture as a powerful

pharmakon against the irrationality of emotional responses, Kantor's project goes in exactly the opposite direction: the audience should become, literally, *ingenuus* – it should regain the ability to be natural, free from all customary practices and all the convictions which have transformed it in just a passive beholder of a work of art that can at best be described as a mere diversion from the seriousness of «real» life.

Being so similar to real children, the wax mannequins of the *Dead Class* are intended to provide a material expression to the idea that drama is a form of reality strictly connected to and even inseparable from everyday existence. Any boundaries between the «reality» of life and the «unreality» of images should be overstepped:

Mannequins smell of sin, of criminal transgression. The existence of these creatures, shaped in man's image, almost «godlessly», in an illegal fashion, is the result of heretical dealings, a manifestation of the dark, nocturnal, rebellious side of human activity. Of crimes and traces of death as sources of knowledge. The vague and inexplicable feeling that through this entity so similar to a living human being but deprived of consciousness and purpose there is transmitted to us a terrifying message of death and nothingness – precisely this feeling become the cause of – simultaneously – that transgression, repudiation, and attraction. Of prohibition and fascination (Kantor, 1975: 112).

With their «criminal transgression», wax mannequins challenge aesthetics as both the science of perception and the theory of art. As for the former, the thorny problem is immediately evident: Kantor regards as artistic – supremely artistic – objects which are usually considered among the most banal (if not squalid) products of a handicraft aimed at nothing more than a slavish imitation of reality. It is the age-old problem of casting, of mechanical reproduction which seems to preclude a priori any claim at artistic status (it suffices to consider the long-standing controversy as to whether the «photographic act» (Dubois, 1983) should be considered as a creative or a merely reproductive one). However, as Schlosser already maintained, «if a case is to be made against wax sculpture, it cannot validly proceed from the abstract “idea”, art as object, but must proceed from the subject role of the artist; not from general considerations relating to the “genre” as such but only from the individual



2. The wax mannequins of the *Dead Class*. © Tomislav Medak
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tomislavmedak/6169571307/in/photostream/>

case» (Schlosser, 1911: 299). It cannot, it must not be just the use of a particular material which undermines the value of an artwork, but rather the way in which that material is used. Wax can surely serve a merely mimetic purpose, but this does not mean that the hyperrealism it allows to reach is necessarily unartistic. Kantor's mannequins take full advantage of the material they are made of, but their seemingly excessive degree of realism is instrumental to a theoretical plan aimed at radically challenging any attempt to clearly separate the world of art from the world of everyday life. In the *Dead Class*, realism becomes expressionism.

Concerning aesthetics as the theory of perception, wax puppets transgress another boundary: that between (real) objects and (unreal) images. Reflecting on the intricate distinction between perception [*Wahrnehmung*] and image consciousness [*Bildbewusstsein*], Edmund Husserl argued that the former makes someone or something appear «in person [*leibhaft*]» (Husserl, 1911-1912: 367), whereas the latter does not «present», but rather «presentifies» an ob-

ject – an object which is not the real object, but instead its image, its «representant» (Husserl, 1904-1905: 20), its *Stell-Vertreter*, something which stands for it. Image consciousness is characterized by a «mediacy» (*ibid.*, 25) that is absent from perceptual presentation. We look at the representing image, but we see the represented object: we apprehend the object *through* the image and *thanks to* the image. Therefore, we should properly speak of «images» if and only if there is a conflict [*Widerstreit*] – however small it may be – between the image itself and the represented object. And we must be fully aware of this conflict, which means that we should have no doubt, no hesitation in recognising the image as *an image-of* something else, something real: «If the conscious relation to something depicted is not given with the image, then we certainly do not have an image» (Husserl, 1904-1905: 32). This consciousness, this awareness, may only arise if, beyond and despite even the most accurate resemblance between representing image and represented object, we are still able to find some mo-

ments of difference: «Despite full internal coinciding, such moments must not be missing in any way» (Husserl, 1904-1905: 33). Contrary to perceptual apprehension [*Wahrnehmungsauffassung*], image apprehension [*Bildauffassung*] has the characteristic of representation *by means of resemblance*, which presupposes the beholder's ability to «see-as», to «catch the identical *in the difference*» (Franzini, 2004: 125): we must be aware of the fact that the depicting object is only similar to the real object depicted.

Kantor's puppets are transgressive in the literal sense of the word: they are able to *trans-gredi*, to cross the threshold between art and non art as well as between perception and image consciousness. Being neither objects nor sub-

jects – or, rather, both objects and subjects – wax figures prove to be particularly suited to infringe the boundaries between the realm of representation and that of reality, showing how porous and vulnerable they actually are. Together with the simple rope separating the stage from the audience, the wax children of the *Dead Class* remind us that theatre should not be reduced to mere *divertissement* and recreation, for we are directly and personally engaged in (and involved by) the play. The images are not at all as distant as we are accustomed to believe. Those children force each and every one of us to repeat, together with Kantor (1967: 86): «The question “Is this already art or is this still reality?” become inconsequential to me».

Notes

- 1 On the fundamental link between death and images see Belting, 2001: 84-124. On the analogy between mannequins and corpses in Kantor's theatre see Koch-Butryn, 2002: 8.
- 2 See also Andrew Bielski, «Kantor's Waxworks: Anti-theatricalism and the personnel of the theatre», in Kobialka, Zarzecka (2015).
- 3 In the *History of Portraiture in Wax* Schlosser does not even mention either Medardo Rosso's work or Degas's *Petite Danseuse*, which was also originally sculpted in wax; nor could the Viennese art historian witness the ever-growing production and diffusion of artistic wax sculptures since the Sixties of the Twentieth-Century (see Ullrich, 2003 and Conte, 2014).

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