

Anna Królíca

Kantor as a visionary of the body

One common denominator for Kantor and dance would be an interest in the body of the performer, and its acknowledgement as a modifiable resource regardless of its physical limitations. Such an approach to corporeality is akin to visual arts, a field to which we may trace back Kantor's origin as a student of the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow. Such an approach entailed a brand new perception of the body of the actor and performer in Polish performing arts. In the 1980s and 90s, such an approach became a trademark of dance performances in international choreographic practice and performing arts in general, e.g. in Flemish contemporary dance. That time saw Belgium and Holland implement systemic, institutional solutions in dance, visual arts and theatre – the disciplines which had long functioned separately from each other began to mesh in the mutual area of performing arts. New creative strategies were shared and annexed to combine divergent disciplines and their respective languages, thus vastly extending the scope of visualization of the body on stage. The body ceased to exist as an entity and semantic sign, instead becoming one of many raw materials utilised by the artist in the process of creation. In the 1990s, the process snowballed. Looking back at the historical framework of Kantor's art, it seems his oeuvre anticipates the process and abounds with tools which transcend narrowly conceived genres and disciplines.

Moreover, Kantor was among the first to account for the meaning of the creative process. He proclaimed the structure of the work as open, changeable and transformable.

Kantor encountered contemporary choreography wherever it took on avant-garde, unconventional and luminal forms which did not directly result from dance traditions yet were part of their historical sequences and transformations (as was the case with his fascination with Oskar Schlemmer's *Das Triadisches Ballet* [Triadic Ballet] and *Bauhaus tanzen* [Bauhaus Dances]). And even though he was discouraged by traditional ballet's artificiality and glitter, Kantor was enchanted by the innovative dance pieces (and other works) by Oskar Schlemmer, sculptor and painter attributed with the creation of mechanical ballets and abstract dance.

Kantor's interest in Bauhaus and constructivism was symptomatic of his early work and resurfaced visibly in his late pieces such as the cricotage *Machine of Love and Death*, which premiered in 1987 at Documenta 8 in Kassel. His fascination with Schlemmer may also be found in *The Death of Tintagiles* (1938), *Balladyna* (1943), *The Return of Odysseus* (1944) and arguably in the concept of bio-object, a combination of a living organism with an everyday object.

The aforementioned early period in Kantor's theatre clearly pronounces his approach to the body of the performer as a material, and that an abstract one. In *The Death of Tintagiles*, based on Maeterlinck's symbolic drama about the abduction of a boy, characters' symbolic dimension was gained through formal, abstract costumes designed as simplified geometrical shapes in vivid shades of black, grey, and gold. Kantor turned to puppet theatre, which he referred to as the Ephemeral (and Mechanic) Puppet Theatre. Puppets themselves were not at the core of Kantor's interest – he referred to Maeterlinck's text owing to his fascination with constructivism, Bauhaus, and Schlemmer. This fascination several more years. Mieczysław Porębski recalls Kantor's *Balladyna* as "somewhat reminiscent of Schlemmerian Bauhaus, with the skittish costumes of Kirkor and Grabiec, and a

balletic quality to their moves, juxtaposed with the surreal, Arpesque aura exuded by Goplana and a Miró-like mobility of her acolytes”.

The very idea of the costume which transforms not merely the actor’s body but reality itself would accompany Kantor in *Théâtre de la mort*. The conglomerate of characters grown together with object in line with the concept of the bio-object (one which we would presently classify as installations) may be seen in *Let the Artists Die*: Hangman with a Gallows/Toilet, Bigot with a Kneeler and Rosary Beads, Individual Washing His Dirty Legs in a Vulgar Bucket, Scullery Maid and Her Sink, Cabaret Whore and her Body.

The first way of choreographic interpretation of Kantors’ theatre projects pertains to his early constructivist performances and refers to the line of abstract, formal dance inspired by Schlemmer’s mechanical ballets.

Kantor’s subsequent works from the *Théâtre de la mort* period put choreographic themes in a different context. They may be connected with the utilization of the idea of the social body perceived as an archive of individual and cultural memory. In dance history, such somatic narratives are related to *Tanztheater*/ Dance Theater founded on the ideas of German expressionist dance. Iconic to *Tanztheater* was the work of Pina Bausch, and the similarities between hers and Kantor’s art go beyond genealogy and converge in a common optics of representation, if not a common way of experiencing the world. It is an experience of artists alien to one another, hailing from different generations and corners of the world, and yet there is a surprising degree of similarities based on the experience of shortage, absence, and loss.

There are two (if not three, if we consider the functioning of the body in Kantor’s Happening Theatre) completely divergent way of historical reading of choreographic themes in the art of Kantor. This brief historical overview does not exhaust the subject. The corporeality of Teatr Cricot 2 actors, the performative character of their actions, performance, the lifting of the radical difference between the rehearsal and the performance render Kantor immensely attractive to contemporary choreographers. The young generation of choreographers increasingly refers to Kantor’s inspiring legacy. Despite the lack of methodology of physical training, which seems crucial to choreographic practice, Kantor’s theatre provides a voluminous reservoir to dancers and owes much to his awareness of the fact that actors cannot forget they use their hands, feet, and bodies to say much more than with their faces and voices, that the plasticity of the body and its system of expression is crucially important.