

Tadeusz Kantor LXXII – 35 -7



Need your advice. Do you know how to enjoy reality?
Give me a short paragraph. I am putting together a series
of advice for my future self, trapped in VR. (AN)

You asked for advice on enjoying reality. By this I came to understand you meant a reality that existed outside, or then at some distance to, the Virtual Reality that you may be trapped in during your daily existence at the architectural office. How to approach this idea of reality as an antidote to one consumed and consuming what has become known as VR? For some days I didn't know how to respond to you. What could I possibly say? I began to think of it slowly as I arrived in Krakow, Poland. And it was only during one early evening when I went in search of the tomb of Tadeusz Kantor that I found some sort of answer.

Who is Tadeusz Kantor you are thinking, and why now? How can a 'visionary' theatre artist (I use 'visionary' with caution) possibly have anything to do with my meaning and your reality? Perhaps it does and it doesn't; just as the camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau. Kantor's life, his theatre, his 'séances', his controlled and precise musing and theatre drawings for the stage productions with his theatre group Cricot 2 dealt so provocatively and so movingly with aspects of reality. Aspects Polish and we can also say universal.

Yet it is painful even to try and put this experience into words. The ways Kantor used to avoid the theatre of illusion meant that reality could never be subject to any artistic representation. If there was a sniff of artifice, if there was any hint of an embalmed message that could comfort the audience or viewer it would be hijacked by Kantor's own relentless presence on stage. He could glower an actor into brilliance whilst reality had to fall short of any expected image and theatre. Kantor was a visual artist who taught us to remember language and text by forgetting them. Silence and a zero still difficult to articulate could provoke an even greater reality and presence.



I would have to write a book on Kantor to try and explain to you what he achieves and what he means to me. I first saw a performance of Kantor called *The Dead Class*. It was in Edinburgh, somewhere around 1975 or 1976.

I had travelled there with a young Polish woman called Grażna. We had driven from Warsaw across Poland via Poznan, Lodz, Berlin and Potsdam to Holland and then onto Britain and Cambridge via Ostend.

She wasn't allowed as a Pole to pass through Checkpoint Charlie, I was. We didn't and took the Berliner ring in subterranean darkness to Potsdam.

I think she had a friend who was an actor with Cricot 2. I don't remember anything else, where we stayed, how we got there and where we went after. I just remember in an old church or civic building in Edinburgh it was the most memorable and moving piece of theatre (if we can call it that) that I had ever seen and have seen since.

Travelling with a woman who might have become my wife but instead 'escaped' with a British passport to New Zealand and finally ended up in Los Angeles is not the narrative here. It was Kantor. Tadeusz Kantor became the portal to what I can call now this 'blind Polishness'. Since then, a Polish imagination, some say 'complex' - the struggle of history, the censored nation, the lost cities, deportation and extermination - has constantly invaded me.



I never saw a Kantor performance again and I never saw Grażyna again, though everywhere I travelled I looked for signs of Kantor and Cricot 2. Publications, a performance here or there, even his art. Later that decade 1978 and 1979 I would visit Warsaw courtesy of the Academy of Theatre and visit every piece of theatre I could. They were all in Polish but that didn't seem to matter. So visual was the work at the time that I was entranced.

Then, whether it was through other playwrights like Grotowski, Sżjana, Mrożek, poets like Różewicz and Miłosz and novelists like Witkiewicz and Gombrowicz this blind Polishness never ceased. Reading the world through Polish art, theatre, poetry and writing became my constant traveller. I can list – thought I won't do it now – the Polish books in the library here and the reality they bring back as I begin to gather them in order to write this.

And now with a question from you somewhat trapped with architecture in your VR world this was an eternal return. I am reminded to find my copy of Schopenhauer but notwithstanding this cyclical energy, I was back in Poland after 40 years and immediately found myself through a reality in Krakow, Auschwitz and Birkenau thrust inside this Polish imagination once more.

Of course, I can still make mistakes between Kantor's 'informel' and zero theatre, between the happening and the theatre of death. I would need more research to put this into context for you. But on a Sunday late afternoon, after a trip to Nowy Huta and returning on tram no 3, I planned a visit to Rakowicki Cemetery. This was where I would find the tomb of Tadeusz Kantor, the one with a sculpture made up of a school desk, a small boy and a large cross resting against the desk.



Rakowicki is a central city 42hectare site full of sepulchral art and monuments to Poland's struggle in the 20th century. Kantor was amongst the important artists, politicians and statesmen from Polish history buried there. I think he is thought of as a theatre visionary. Kantor was itemised as No 23 on the list of notable tombs and I immediately turned left in the direction of the area I thought was 23. Soon it became clear, this was the oldest section of the cemetery with unkempt, even disintegrating graves from the first half of the 19th century. Clearly Kantor was not here.

I had noticed a man cleaning out a tomb and carrying dead flowers to a cage containing a mass of dead flowers, plastic candles and decaying wreaths. I approach him. He spoke English. "Unlikely someone like Kantor is here, more likely somewhere over there." He pointed to the church located somewhat on the central axis of the cemetery but indicates 'beyond'.

As I walk, I hear a service being relayed and getting closer to the church I realise it is from speakers placed in the small central clearing. I don't know which way to turn. I do this often. I come unprepared knowing that the adventure of finding the tomb will be part of the reality of the moment. I never like to check in advance or even notice whether it is mentioned in a guidebook. For some moments I wander back and forth in the presence of the Polish language.

I have done this in every city I have ever visited. I understand nothing and am blind to what is happening. Yet I am not blind. I notice a young woman in a grey down jacket with tanned legs and short black boots. Somehow the tanned legs affect me and seem incongruous. She speaks no English and I speak no Polish, but the mention of Tadeusz Kantor is enough. She takes out her phone and writes what I think is "Grób Tadeusza Kantora".

Suddenly we are being navigated and I follow her. For some reason she must know I speak no Polish but proceeds to speak intensely about something or other. We go up and down, she turns the phone in different directions, we walk, and the app seems to be guiding us. But we are eventually lost and she looks at me imploringly. She sees and speaks to another elderly man (besides me). He recognises the name of course and immediately starts guiding us to where Google failed.

The two of them have what I imagine is an intense conversation. I remain silent. More navigation as the man in a thick blue jumper tries to remember. He takes us down one aisle and up another. We are getting closer it seems. He walks slower. He looks up. I expect to see the bench, the small boy and cross on the tomb; the sculpture by Kantor I imagine is still there. But it's not.

“There,” he says, and indicates a tomb squeezed in amongst the others. True the bench is still there. But the rest of the sculpture has gone, been pilfered or is in a museum somewhere. I had also expected the tomb to be alone but how is that possible in such a cemetery? Instead, it is tightly packed, barely a foot between tombs barely a space to walk up to it. It is impossible to stand, and one has to move around the tomb sideways.



It is the second name of the tomb: Tadeusz Kantor +1915 +1990. The other one his mother, Helena Kantor +1962. I don't know. There are flowers, mostly dead or dying, votive candles burnt out, plastic light containers. There is a wreath on the floor in front of the tomb with the words *Wielipole Wielipole* on the sash. Thinking I would lift it back onto the tomb, it disintegrates at the first touch.

My navigators depart and I pay my respects just as I do with my parents smaller, much more modest stone in the churchyard in North Wales.

Finger to the lips finger to the stone: the sepulchral kiss. Exiting the cemetery, I check once more the name and location on the board at the entrance. There it is. I misread it. Tadeusz Kantor LXXII – 35 -7.

The woman in grey was still there when I left. She was looking for the tomb of Andrej Wajda. And I went for Tram no 2 thinking of this Sunday evening and your request for advice about reality. How is that possible? This was really all I could come up with. But I was also reminded of two books which I would recommend to you. They are part of a series in epistolary form on the art of mentoring. One by Christopher Hitchens is called 'Letters to a Young Contrarian', the second is 'Letters to a Young Activist' by Todd Gitlin. Both are worth reading. The series of course recalls 'Letters to a Young Poet' written by Rainer Maria Rilke. And now I probably have to write a book for you called *Letters to Young Iranian* (on Reality, Kantor and My Blind Polish Imagination). Leave the light on!



