

# Tadeusz Kantor's *Memory*:

Other pasts, other futures

Edited by Michal Kobialka and Natalia Zarzecka

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# Kantor after Duchamp

Mischa Twitchin

Kind of subtitle: delay in glass<sup>1</sup>

— Marcel Duchamp

The process of annexing reality, defined as a strategy and a method, has been Cricot 2's ideological foundation since 1955<sup>2</sup>

— Tadeusz Kantor

More than two decades after the final performances of Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot 2, how do the company's productions inform an understanding of theatre history today, not least concerning the differentiation between a documented past and a performed present?

Addressing the possible object(s) of theatre studies as a discipline, Erika Fischer-Lichte proposes the following:

Certain phenomena in the distant or even recent past of theatre history attract attention — a particular use of the body, place of performance, construction of space, a specific way of manipulating objects, a certain use of sounds and noises, some sentences in a review of a visiting performance. For various reasons, such things are so striking that they demand to be understood — their context, the conditions on which they are based, their function and meaning.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 Marcel Duchamp, 'The Green Box', trans. by George Heard Hamilton, in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. by Michel Sanouillet and Emer Peterson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973), pp. 26–72 (p. 26).
- 2 'Annexed Reality', in Tadeusz Kantor, *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944–1990*, ed. and trans. by Michal Kobialka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 71–76 (p. 71).
- 3 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective*, trans. by Jo Riley (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1997), p. 10. This citation from Fischer-Lichte's essay (along with that reproduced below) is included here for its articulation of what may be understood of 'theatre history', and not for the purpose of engaging with her broader argument in this essay or elsewhere. It is worth noting that her more recent elaboration, in *The Transformative Power of Performance*, trans. by Saskya Jain (London: Routledge, 2008), of an 'autopoietic feedback loop', for instance, to identify the dynamic of theatrical performance in its 'specific aestheticity' precludes thinking of theatrical performance as a finished or closed work (that is, within an 'aesthetics of the performative').

How might such a categorisation of theatrical phenomena, with its temporal differentiation between their production and reception, admit — or even impede — an understanding of the Cricot 2 within ‘theatre history’?

To address the object(s) of such a history supposes that we address its concept(s). For instance, if the question is how or why particular phenomena, as instances of theatrical practice, historically ‘attract attention’ while others do not, we are engaged as much with a concept of historical attention as of theatrical attraction. As Theodor Adorno comments, ‘Every artwork [...] participates in history and thus oversteps its own uniqueness. [...] It is in the dimension of history that the individual aesthetic object and its concept communicate. History is inherent to aesthetic theory’. ‘Inherent’, that is, not simply to its disciplinary categories, but to understanding its objects as historical in the first place. Adorno continues, ‘The concrete historical situation of art registers concrete demands. Aesthetics begins with reflection on them; only through them does a perspective open on what art is’ — that is to say, philosophically or critically.<sup>4</sup> With respect to which, returning to Fischer-Lichte, what is perhaps most striking for the theatre historian is indeed the very ‘demand’ of certain theatrical phenomena to be understood after their performance at all.

If theatre is an art, such phenomena demand to be understood not simply *as theatre* (instances of its history, within the horizon of its professional practice), but as instances of its possible *concept* (engaging with the question of its object; indeed, ‘what is theatre?’). As Adorno remarks concerning the aesthetic object: ‘The truth of this objectivity is constituted by what comes later, in the process of its development, not by simply what is posited’.<sup>5</sup> Rather than being posited, as documented instances, the demand of ‘certain phenomena’ places their past in the future. The object of study is not simply perceived but conceived, as an example of what is still to be understood in what has already been found ‘striking’ in their own work by the artist.<sup>6</sup>

The distinction between process and production, as also between reception and production, is what is in question when addressing Kantor’s theatre here ‘after Duchamp’; not so much for understanding the Cricot 2 in terms of these distinctions, as trying to understand, through Kantor’s example, the very terms of these distinctions themselves.

4 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1999), pp. 358–59.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 357.

6 This is continually proposed by Kantor in his manifestos, and it is noteworthy that Fischer-Lichte’s inventory of resources for an historian’s study does not include the artist’s own theorisations.

This ‘already’ is identified here as a question of understanding ‘Kantor *after* Duchamp’ — rather than understanding ‘Kantor *and* Duchamp’ — whereby the relation between these two artists is not simply ‘posited’ by conjunction.<sup>7</sup> In the example below, of one of Kantor’s stage objects, the question of its appearance in performance is the very question of its historical study. With the Cricot 2 theatre, after all, we need not simply resort to that standard document of past performance, a DVD (as if Kantor were to be understood historically ‘after Sapija’, for instance). A DVD offers the appearance of information about a performance as though finished and complete, as one medium (performance) becomes the content, or object, of another (video).<sup>8</sup> This becomes evident if we imagine the multiple re-editing that would be possible were the footage to be available. With Kantor’s stage objects, by contrast, a specific dramaturgy is documented in its own medium, at least as this may be conceived of by their example.

While the question of what Walter Benjamin called a ‘Copernican revolution’ in history is perhaps most familiar in terms of what one might call his ‘dialectical sur-materialism’ (overturning the historicism that his friend Kracauer, for instance, associated with the ideology of the

- 7 This title, of course, echoes that of Thierry De Duve’s study *Kant after Duchamp*. The point, however, is not the echo, but rather the field of research that it proposes for any modernist aesthetics; particularly as concerns, *pace* De Duve, a reproduction that occupies the space — both material and conceptual — of an original within the history-making of a museum (of modern art). See *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 418–19. Although I will develop this theme further in another essay, of particular relevance here is also Benjamin Buchloh’s reading of Marcel Broodthaers’s ‘museum fictions’. Buchloh writes: ‘As usual, the reflection upon the origins of the artist’s concern to integrate within the conception of a work, the final forms of distribution and the conditions of reception and acculturation, the modes of reading that ensue from them and that are contained within the practices of institutionalisation, has to take its point of departure in a reference to the work of Marcel Duchamp...’ See Benjamin Buchloh, ‘The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers’, in *Museums by Artists*, ed. by A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), pp. 45–56 (p. 45).
- 8 This idea by Marshall McLuhan is one of the subjects of Friedrich Kittler’s lectures; see Kittler, *Optical Media*, trans. by Anthony Enns (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010). It would be interesting to compare the difference of views of the filmmakers who worked with Kantor, where — to cite Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty — it seems that the question was, typically, ‘who is to be master?’, rather than ‘what is the medium?’ See the interviews with Andrzej Sapija and Andrzej Wajda in *Polish Theatre Perspectives*, 1 (2015), <<http://dx.doi.org/10.15229/ptp.2015>> [accessed 15 November 2014]; with Kluth, Mahlow, Rothenerger et al in Uta Schorlemmer, *Kunst ist ein Verbrechen* (Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2007); and with Krzysztof Miklaszewski in his *Encounters with Tadeusz Kantor*, trans. and ed. by George Hyde (London: Routledge, 2002).

photograph),<sup>9</sup> variations of this ‘revolution’ (with which Kantor identified) characterise modernism in its relation to tradition.<sup>10</sup> In his famous Houston lecture on ‘The Creative Act’, for example, Duchamp cites T. S. Eliot on the aesthetic understanding of the past as an interpretation of the present: ‘The past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past’.<sup>11</sup> Eliot’s own essay concludes with a proposal that the artwork’s ‘demand’ be understood by reference to ‘what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past’, by being ‘conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living’.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of theatre in particular, how and why do certain phenomena of the past still appeal, as ‘already living’, to the present? How is their ‘demand’ experienced afterwards, if the essence of theatre’s appeal — in its particularity, if it has one, as a medium — is supposed to be the co-presence of audience and performer?

Paraphrasing Max Herrmann, Fischer-Lichte insists that it is the ‘theatre event’ that defines theatre specifically:

As a particular art form, theatre can be defined as a performing art that unfolds in different kinds of spaces using heterogeneous materials such as the human body, voice, various kinds of objects, light, music, language, and sounds to create the theatrical performance as its product or work. Such a work is, of course, of a transitory, ephemeral nature. It does not dispose of a fixed artefact that could be conveyed and handed down to another generation. The product of theatre is consumed and vanishes in the very process of being produced. This

- 9 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 10 The phrase ‘Copernican Revolution’ appears several times in the *Arcades* project. For example: ‘The Copernican Revolution in historical perception is as follows. Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in “what has been”, and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal — the flash of awakened consciousness’. Crucially, Benjamin continues to reflect on the consequences that follow from this assertion: ‘Politics attains primacy over history’ (K1, 2). The allegorical model offered by Benjamin for this ‘awakening of consciousness’ is that of the legibility of the image, transposing the historical into the figural (N3, 1). See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), pp. 388–89 and pp. 462–63.
- 11 Duchamp, ‘The Creative Act’, in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, pp. 138–41 (p. 138). Eliot’s essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ was originally published in 1919 and republished in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp. 13–22 (Duchamp’s citation can be found on p. 15).
- 12 Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, p. 22.



seems to me to be one of the commonly acknowledged differences between theatre and all other art forms which create works of a more permanent nature — those which have a fixed and transportable artefact, such as the fine arts, literature, film, and, to a certain extent, music (musical scores).<sup>13</sup>

As distinct from the literary form of a script, the material construction of a scenographic model, or even the embodied practice of a particular actor training, the theatrical object is defined here as ‘vanishing in its very production’. Taken by themselves, each of these ‘fixed and transportable’ examples of the component arts of theatre — their production and their medium-specific documentation — imply a dramaturgy (in the sense of both its historical attention and theatrical attraction) that only very awkwardly admits the history of the Cricot 2. Indeed, simply distinguishing these phenomena from the specifically theatrical event fails to address this dramaturgy. What the Cricot 2 offers to historical study is a different kind of object, demanding a new concept for presenting its past: what Kantor calls, after Duchamp, the ‘annexation of reality’.

In addressing the history of the Cricot 2, a key aspect of this reality is Kantor’s death, conceived theatrically, in his own lifetime, as a question of being onstage. Again, if Kantor’s theatre has not been performed for over twenty years, what is it of his work, of its concept, ‘after the event’, that still demands to be understood?<sup>14</sup> If not in terms of a distinction between a documented past and a performed present, of a ‘fixed artefact’ and what is ‘consumed in the very process of being produced’, what kind of object does this theatre present to study? And why, indeed, address this question in terms of ‘Kantor after Duchamp’, rather than simply ‘Kantor after Kantor’? With this title, it is not a question of chronology, but of reading Kantor after his own reference to Duchamp. As with Duchamp’s example of Eliot, this is not a question of identifying an influence (as if that would explain something about Kantor’s work), any more than of reading Duchamp’s work as though it applied to Kantor’s own. This title simply follows Kantor in referring his work to the wider field of twentieth-century art history (distinct from the restricted field of its

<sup>13</sup> Fischer-Lichte, *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Intriguingly, Duchamp himself proposed a twenty-year limit on the life of the artwork, indicating that it was ‘shorter than a man’s lifetime’. This would seem to have been a view shared, ironically, by museums during Duchamp’s own lifetime too, at least prior to the major retrospectives in the 1960s. The Philadelphia Museum, for instance, received the Arensbergs’ collection of Duchamp’s work in 1950 because it offered to exhibit it for twenty-five years, after the Metropolitan Museum in New York offered only five years, and the Chicago Art Institute ten years. See Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. by Ron Padgett (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 87.

theatre history), in order to address the very question of its 'demand' to be understood historically.<sup>15</sup>

Across his many manifestos, Kantor repeatedly offers the example of Duchamp's urinal, or rather, the *Fountain*. But of what is this object an example (whether for an understanding of Kantor's work, or as itself an artwork)? Its status as a work of art, indeed, poses the very question of its 'objecthood' (as evident in the ambiguity of its reference, as a urinal or as *Fountain*). This ambiguity is not resolved by the appearance of the signature, *R. Mutt*, by which the object is marked (distinct from that of the manufacturer, the J. L. Mott Iron Works).<sup>16</sup> Rather, under the artist's name, *Fountain* presents itself as the particular example of a concept of an object: the 'Readymade'.<sup>17</sup>

This 'real' object is 'created' as a work of art through the recognition of a concept (a decision, or even a signature) of the artist. Such an object is significant not only *in* art history, but also *for* the concept of such a history itself, as it proposes a new idea of what its objects might be. Museums of modern art, however, tend to avoid its implications, effecting an institutional reversal of the idea that a urinal might resemble, or indeed be, an

<sup>15</sup> When Kantor writes that: 'I derive my observations from the domain of theatre, but they are relevant to all current art', it means that his place in theatre history cannot be isolated from a sense of 'current art'. See Kantor, 'The Theatre of Death', in *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, pp. 106–24 (p. 122). The shifting question of this disciplinary relation between histories (and their objects) is addressed in detail by Amelia Jones in her essay 'Live art in art history: a paradox?', in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. by Tracy Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 151–65 (see especially pp. 160–61 and 164–65).

<sup>16</sup> As Thierry De Duve notes, the history of this object, as that of its exhibition, is 'exemplary in showing how the conditions of artistic enunciation gather together and go into effect at the meeting point of an object and an institution'. De Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, p. 411.

<sup>17</sup> Concerning the Readymade, from Duchamp's poetic *Bottle Rack* to Warhol's prosaic *Brillo Box*, the historical contrast between the 'poor object' of Pop Art and that of Kantor's theatre — as also between the 'wrappings' of consumerism and those of a world in which (in imagination, at least) there are still 'cinnamon shops' — would be a topic for another essay. The potential differences in the term 'poor' applied to an object as between East and West in the context of the Cold War is, nonetheless, worth noting here, rather than simply being elided into a hitherto dominant (Western) art-historical narrative. In this regard, see for example, Suzana Milevska, 'The Readymade and the Question of the Fabrication of Objects and Subjects', in *Primary Documents*, ed. by Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), pp. 182–91. The complexity of Kantor's position in this context (oriented towards Paris as much as towards Kraków) is highlighted by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski in his study of the European avant-garde *In the Shadow of Yalta*, trans. by Anna Brzyski (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).



Fountain by Marcel Duchamp (1917).

artwork (as a reproduction). Concealing any challenge to the value of an original, the museum re-poses the traditional aesthetic notion that the artwork might, rather, resemble a urinal (thereby undoing the object's concrete 'demand to be understood').<sup>18</sup>

Known (or understood) only by its replica, or reproduction, the example of *Fountain's* very status as an artwork — not the least of what is 'striking' about it — is already that of a document, from its appearance in a photograph by Stieglitz, accompanying an article in the New York art magazine *The Blind Man* (the very title of which declares its

<sup>18</sup> Translated into the curation of live art, this leads to the curious conceptual contradictions evident in the current vogue for recreations or re-enactments of iconic performance art pieces. For example, in the 'Seven Easy Pieces' commissioned from Marina Abramović by the Guggenheim, the relation between original and reproduction is simply supposed historically, not least as a premise for claims concerning copyright to which the embodied concept of the artists' work is reduced. See Marina Abramović, *7 Easy Pieces* (Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 230.

Dadaist sympathies), to the subsequent replicas commissioned from Duchamp by various galleries.<sup>19</sup> It is also from *The Blind Man* article that the by-now standard meaning of the Readymade, if not yet its name, derives: '[Mr Mutt] took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view — created a new thought for that object'.<sup>20</sup>

By appealing to this Readymade concept of an object, Kantor makes his own particular demand upon our understanding of theatre history: not only to include the Cricot 2, but also to attend to his reading of other theatre artists, such as Craig.<sup>21</sup> Kantor too 'created a new thought' for the objects constituting the phenomena of theatrical performance — objects that include text, space, and actors — as conceived in *theatrical* terms (distinct from the theatrical being conceived in terms of any one of these potential artefacts). Here, for instance, the theatre historian must address the concept of actors as objects; in their appearance as annexed realities under the name of an artist ('T. Kantor') rather than that of the author ('Witkacy') of a character being played.

Let us consider now a particular example of this interplay between artefact and performance in Kantor's work, the so-called 'Annihilating Machine' made for the 1963 Cricot 2 production of Witkacy's *The Madman and the Nun* (and its replica, made from the original parts, for the

19 As Arthur C. Danto appreciatively remarks: 'That particular line of urinal disappeared, and not even the Museum of Modern Art, with all its resources, was able to find an exact duplicate for its High and Low show of 1990'. See Danto, *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 73.

20 Louise Norton, 'The Richard Mutt Case', *The Blind Man*, 2 (May 1917), 5–6 (p. 5); a facsimile of these pages is available online at <<http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/blindman/2/index.htm>> [accessed 15 November 2014]. Here the question of art — as an idea of the artist (rather than a demonstration of traditional skills or craft) — reverses the operations of commodification, identified by Benjamin (in the surrealist dream of an object's 'use' value): 'It should be kept in mind that, in the nineteenth century, the number of "hollowed out" things increases at a rate and on a scale that was previously unknown, for technical progress is continually withdrawing newly introduced objects from circulation'. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, N5, 2 (p. 466).

21 As late as 1990, for example, the editors of *New Theatre Quarterly* did not recognise this, leaving uncorrected the translation of 'finished objects' (i.e. Readymades) in an interview with Kantor, even when he is explicitly discussing Duchamp. See 'Art is a Kind of Exhibitionism', Kantor in conversation with Barbara Sawa, trans. by Piotr Kuchwiczak, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 6.21 (1990), 64–69 (p. 66). The question of 'Craig after Duchamp' was the subject of a previous paper that I gave at a conference on Craig and Appia organised by the Centre for Performance Research at Aberystwyth, 5–7 December 2003.

Cricoteka in 1980).<sup>22</sup> Kantor's own title for this production, and that of the accompanying manifesto in which he articulated its concept, was 'zero theatre' (by itself a modernist appeal). In his text, Kantor highlights especially the reduction of the actors' interpretative work to zero, in a scenario intended to forestall the identificatory pathos traditionally associated with their art (thereby leaving them free to be inventive, or at least provocative, in their use of the text, itself understood as a Readymade).<sup>23</sup> Crucially, Kantor's manifestos allow the theatre historian to think through (or after) the concept of his productions, rather than simply describing (or paraphrasing) them.

The particular dramaturgy of the Cricot 2 — working *with*, rather than *from*, a textual source — aims to destroy the finished illusion of interpretative mastery of a play's meanings, as structured in a hierarchy of expressive means, including its performance being re-written historically in conformity with traditional categories of theatre production. In contrast to prevailing theatrical standards, Kantor worked towards this zero condition of non-acting to admit the autonomy of elements within the production, so that no one element would be understood as serving to interpret, as distinct from impacting upon, any other. As Michal Kobialka describes it, the actors' performance in this production is 'paratextual' rather than 'metatextual'.<sup>24</sup>

Not yet an onstage figure — the arbiter of the actors' reality, making their appearance onstage questionable, in every sense — Kantor anticipates with an object the role he himself would later take on in his performances. Without that particular frisson, which Kantor so relished, of the unprofessionalism and illegitimacy of the equally questionable appearance of the director onstage, the Annihilating Machine's action forestalls the impression of a performance as finished.<sup>25</sup> The centrepiece of the 'zero theatre' production, the machine was an animated (or, rather,

22 See the photograph on the Cricoteka website, available at <<http://www.cricoteka.pl/en/main.php?d=plastyka&kat=21&id=140>> [accessed 15 November 2014].

23 As Kantor declared in 1967: "The dramatic text is also a "ready-made object" that has been formed outside the zone of performance and the audience's reality. It is an object that has been found; an object whose structure is dense and whose identity is delineated by its own fiction, illusion, and psychophysical dimension'. See Kantor, 'Theatre Happening', in *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, pp. 84–86 (p. 86).

24 Kobialka, 'The Quest for the Self/Other: A Critical Study of Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre', in *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, pp. 267–368 (p. 290).

25 The director onstage was a figure who would become, after *The Dead Class*, 'the author'. See, for instance, the list of characters for *Let the Artists Die*: 'myself, in person, principal author' (reprinted in *Kantor 2*, ed. by Denis Bablet (= *Les Voies de la Création Théâtrale*, 18 (1993)), p. 36).

automated) ‘sculpture’ of folding (Readymade) wooden chairs, piled on top of each other. Once set in motion — heaving up and down, expanding and contracting, with a loud clatter — it was conceived as negating the actors’ embodied expressivity. Offering no room for the actors, its platform literally impeded them from taking centre stage, while its repetitive, mechanical action prevented the envisioning of the play’s fiction of time and place through scenic illusion.

Kantor’s ‘zero theatre’ dramaturgy proposes new possibilities for the actors’ work, and, like Witkacy’s own manifestos, is as much a critique of prevailing standards of performance as an introduction to his own production. Although Witkacy’s play itself supposes a scenic art-as-illusion, which Kantor reduces to zero, it nonetheless also demands a dramaturgy that would not be defined by this. Its ‘non-Euclidean’, Guignol staging ridicules the pathos of psychologically understood, character-based performance,<sup>26</sup> and demands ‘pure forms’ of theatrical art, resisting traditional ‘theatricalisation’.<sup>27</sup>

In his essay on ‘a new type of play’, written three years before *The Madman and the Nun*, Witkacy asks himself ironically, reflecting on his model for a non-realistic theatre: ‘In other words, an insane asylum? Or, rather, a madman’s brain on stage?’<sup>28</sup> While Kantor’s Annihilating Machine is described as supporting, or indeed imposing, the non-acting of the performers, we might be tempted to read this apparatus symbolically in terms of the situation that the play describes. It is instructive, therefore, to compare Kantor’s scenario — a non-design, in traditional

26 Witkacy’s 1921 play *Gyubal Wahazar* is subtitled ‘a non-Euclidean drama in four acts’, but this term applies well to much of his dramaturgy. A contemporary review of the 1926 production of *The Madman and the Nun*, at the Teatr Mały (Little Theatre) in Warsaw, describes the play as ‘a Grand Guignol clinical drama’. Translated and cited in Daniel Gerould, *Witkacy, as an Imaginative Writer* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), p. 219, n. 12.

27 Of course, productions do not necessarily engage with the author’s dramaturgy. Brecht, for example, cautioned precisely against this capacity of the ‘theatre apparatus’ simply to ‘re-theatricalise’ anything through the workings of its own ‘professional’ practice: ‘This apparatus resists all conversion to other purposes...’ See Brecht’s ‘The Literarization of the Theatre’, in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 43. Indeed, the dramaturgical theories of both Witkacy and Kantor are still striking, as the contemporary context that they each address (pre- and post-war) remains all too familiar even today.

28 ‘On a New Type of Play’, in Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *The Madman and the Nun and Other Plays*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Gerould and C. S. Durer (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), pp. 291–97 (p. 295).

terms, like the non-acting it intends — with that of his contemporary, Józef Szajna, who worked on the play's first post-war production in 1959.<sup>29</sup>

From photographs of this production, we can see that while the setting and the actors appear highly stylised, the frame, of course, remains that of playing on a stage — with all its given formalisations of background and foreground — complete with appropriate scenic objects, such as the bed and the clock that are referenced in the text (albeit both appearing monstrously out of human scale).<sup>30</sup> There are, however, strange sculptural objects too, suggestive of the metaphysical and poetic aspirations of which the play speaks. The Guignol conventions for showing the violent interplay between these aspirations and confinement in an insane asylum — the play's principal theme — are clearly present. For all its creative sensitivity to Witkacy's dramaturgy, however, both the design and the actors' work remain bound to the dissembling reality of the stage. Kantor's machine, by contrast, starts with this as the very reality to be challenged (or reduced to zero), not only spatially, but also in the machine's enactment of repetition, contrasting the actors' expressivity with an effect of mechanical 'meaninglessness'.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike Szajna's design concept, the 'zero theatre' resists reading the stage, in the image of the play's protagonist, as an interpretation of the mutual violence between repression and liberation.<sup>32</sup> The Annihilat-

29 It was presented in a double-bill with *In a Country Manor* (which Kantor would himself use for his next production, in Germany, in 1966) at the Teatr Dramatyczny in Warsaw, and directed by Wanda Laskowska. The comparison here is made in the absence of 'the absolutely diabolic scheme for the scenery of this play' by 'the artist-painter Iwo Gall', as advocated by Witkacy himself in the 'author's stipulation' with which the text concludes! See *The Madman and the Nun*, p. 31.

30 See, for example, the images published in the English editions of *The Madman and the Nun*, and also in *Józef Szajna i jego świat* (Józef Szajna and his World), ed. by Bożena Kowalska (Warsaw: Zachęta Gallery, 2000).

31 Kantor, 'The Zero Theatre', in *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, pp. 59–70 (p. 69).

32 Gerould and Durer quote Szajna's own description of 'how he made the cell [of the insane asylum] into the interior of Walpurg's [the protagonist's] mind': 'The cell in Witkacy's *The Madman and the Nun* is represented by a wall that surrounds the hero of the play and the objects in the niches, a large moving head that spies on him, an automatic clock with the mechanism pulled out of it and the swaying symbol of unspecified biological form. The rocking lamp and the turned-up volume of the ticking of the clock are attuned to the mounting frenzy of the "madman's" monologue. They help define the emotion indirectly and by allusion. Acting on the principle of psychograms, the props penetrate to the levels that often escape direct and rational rules, increasing tension'. See Gerould and Durer, 'The Madman and the Nun: Introduction', in Witkiewicz, *The Madman and the Nun and The Crazy Locomotive: Three Plays (including The Water Hen) by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz* (New York: Applause Theater Book Publishers, 1989), p. 4.

ing Machine might appear, then, to serve for any text, or at least for any instance of a 'zero theatre' production. But Kantor's stage machines, with rare exceptions, were only ever used in conjunction with specific texts (which, then, allows for their quotation in the later Cricot 2 production *I Shall Never Return*). Indeed, in the performances after *Wielopole*, *Wielopole*, the objects and characters of the Cricot 2's production history became the company's own Readymade documentation; a kind of *scène en valise*, to echo Duchamp. That the Annihilating Machine is not used in any other production but appears rather as an object in Kantor's subsequent project, the 'Anti-Exhibition' (held in November of the same year, also at the Krzysztofory Gallery), suggests that it models questions of performance as posed by the particular production rather than by the play. It presents the theatrical object as itself a work of art; not, then, an artefact (a scenographic scale model) documenting the interpretation of a stage space derived from literature, but a model that 'annexes' the reality of a performance for that of an exhibition, for a new audience.<sup>33</sup>

The comparison here between Szajna's and Kantor's approaches to the concept of stage space — in relation to the actors' dependence on, or independence from, the play — draws on the evidence of standard historical documents, such as texts and photographs, but does not explain the 'objecthood' of the Annihilating Machine itself, any more than reference to the article published in *The Blind Man* explains that of the replica *Fountain* exhibited at the Tate Modern. These documentary resources do not answer to the *aesthetic* question posed by the object for the student of theatre history. Indeed, the 'annihilating' function of the machine recurs in Kantor's own presentation of such documentary resources in his 'Anti-Exhibition', as a question of understanding the relation between artistic process and production.

Reflecting on 'the work of art and the process', Kantor speaks of this exhibition in terms of an ambition to resist the presentation of finished or completed works. Preferring to speak of a 'junk room' collection of what remains of the working process, Kantor presents the scraps or remnants that would ordinarily be excluded by the 'professional' standards of an exhibition: "The germ of my concept was to reject the idea of a complete and finished work of art, to discard the feeling of satisfaction derived from the denouement, and to focus on attempts and nothing but attempts!"<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> This in fact characterises all of Kantor's stage machines, going back to (or, at least, retroactively referencing) the room in which he clandestinely produced a version of Wyspiański's *The Return of Odysseus* in Kraków during the Nazi occupation, itself made into a replica for the Cricoteka. See: <<http://www.cricoteka.pl/en/main.php?d=plastyka&kat=21&id=137>> [accessed 15 November 2014].

<sup>34</sup> Kantor, 'The Work of Art and the Process', in *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, pp. 125–28 (p. 127). There is in this exhibition project itself a kind of Dadaist echo



Here the Annihilating Machine plays its part, performing the paradox of the artist's concept in forestalling a completion in (and by) the past tense. Kantor writes: 'The fact that the perception of the creative act takes place only when the process ceases might be puzzling. This perception is limited only to the "consumption" of the *product*, which is presented to us in the form of a book, an orchestral performance, or an exhibited painting'; that is, in the artefacts of the creative act, just as with the history of theatrical production.<sup>35</sup> Here we return to the opening question of this essay: how are we to understand the objects of theatre history, when not defined as either 'vanishing' or 'complete and finished', but in the time of their concept; in what we might call (after Duchamp) the art of their 'delay'?

The polemics (after Fried)<sup>36</sup> concerning 'presence' in art and theatre, whether as an achievement or an alibi, relate to Duchamp's claim that it is the spectator or audience who co-creates the art of today, at least in (and as) its future. Kantor anticipates this *memento mori* for the artist by staging it, making the reception of his actor-objects' performance itself part of the production, whether in the presence of the Annihilating Machine's mechanical fiction of breathing, or that of his own mortal frame. In a diary note, he describes his performance presence as marking the threshold of its absence: 'Again, I am on stage. I will probably never fully explain this phenomenon either to you or to myself. To be precise, I am not on stage, but at the threshold. In front of me, there is the audience — you, Ladies and Gentlemen — that is, according to my vocabulary, REALITY. Behind me, there is the stage, that is, ILLUSION, FICTION'.<sup>37</sup>

Kantor's art acknowledges the immanence of death in life. In his 'Little Manifesto', for instance, he addresses the jury awarding him the Rembrandt Prize, replying to their recognition of him as an artist with

of the 'refusal' by the Society of Independent Artists to exhibit the *Fountain* (as is addressed in Louise Norton's article in *The Blind Man*).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>36</sup> Debate about the relation between art and theatre has been given a curiously distinctive key by reference to Michael Fried's use of the word 'theatre' to help define — by contrast — the formal autonomy of an art work or object in his classic 1967 essay 'Art and Objecthood', reprinted in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Here it is a question of the historical understanding of an aesthetic object, where its art is formally that of its medium. Theatre, arguably without its own medium, exists between different media and therefore does not make for art (although Fried makes exceptions of both Artaud and Brecht). For Fried, 'theatre' became the title for a long tradition of 'anti-art' (in which the history of the Readymade finds its echoes), which has since been rewritten as that of 'performance art'.

<sup>37</sup> From Kantor's private diary, trans. and cited in Kobialka, 'Forget Kantor', *Performing Arts Journal*, 16.2 (1994), 1–17 (p. 2).

his own recognition, as an artist, of death.<sup>38</sup> Kantor's theatre prefigures his absence onstage, not only in the impossibility of its impersonation (or interpretation) by an actor, as is evident in the posthumous performances of *Today Is My Birthday* (1990–91), but already in the example of the Annihilating Machine. While no actor can embody or reproduce it onstage, this role (of the theatre artist) finds an 'already living' replica in the machine, as an example of its concept.

What might we call this type of object, whose concept Kantor proposes? Perhaps, after Duchamp (in the 'possible subtitle' of this essay), we might understand the 'demand' of such objects in terms of a 'poetic word', a word 'not distorted by sense', a word that Duchamp himself 'couldn't even explain': a 'delay'.<sup>39</sup> The replica Annihilating Machine still testifies to that threshold that Kantor's theatre made so present in the past — between art and audience, object and performance, fiction and reality — as the *art* of a future delayed.

<sup>38</sup> The text of 'A Little Manifesto' is reproduced in the twelfth 'Milano Lesson', in *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, p. 250.

<sup>39</sup> Duchamp, in Cabanne, *Dialogues*, pp. 40 and 90.