CMOK to YOU To: A Correspondence

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surely but slowly...
i’m advancing through the history of cont. theater, and i’d like to thank you for directing me to M. Augé and other helpful references
i am shocked though that you wld ever think that i sent you my intro page as any meaningful critique.. the rest of my draft goes like.. eerrr

Kantor devours the univer of Kafka, but also the univer of the Polish writers such as Wyspianski, Witkiewicz, Gombrowicz and Bruno Schulz. And as much as Kantor was under the influence of Gombrowicz and his theater of the absurd throughout his life, by the end of it his thoughts occupied the minimalist economy of Schulz, whom Bablet calls “Polish Kafka” but whose “ubermanequin” body certainly nourished my compatriot Kish as well as his Polish counterpart. In the Dead Class, Kantor conducts the steady but rather hidden dialogue with Schulz, the author of Tractatus on Mannequins, who is his Virgil, thus his guide in the degraded reality of the junk world and discarded objects not only in this particular play but also in Waterhen (the theme of the eternal voyage).

Kantor’s reality reflects horrors since 1942 when he created in Cracovie his first clandestine theater in the catacombs, influenced by Schlemmer’s mannequins and the Bauhaus stage scenography. His first play Slowacki’s Balladyna as well as his Return of Ulisses in 1944, also performed in a non-place (as Marc Augé would name the lieu) bear marks of abstract and austere realism including raw materials, mud, dust, a cannon and old wooden logs, dusty boxes, the entire minimalist stage world which Kantor is going to describe in his theoretical essay “The Independent Theater”.

We shouldn’t watch a play the way we watch a painting. For the aesthetic pleasure, but we have to live through the theater piece properly. I don’t obey aesthetic canons/ I am not connected to any historical era/ I know them and these don’t interest me/ I am only profoundly endebted to the era in which I live and to the people who live next to me. I believe that the barbarians can coexist with the subtle ones, the tragedy can co-exist with the ironic laughter/ I believe that everything is born out of contrast and that the bigger the contrast the more palpable and concrete and lively this world (is).

Yes, this stance we often found in Rabelais, and whenever I think of Kantor, Kantor the director or the performance artist, I see his connection with the great Russian Constructivists such as Malevich, but also with someone like Michail Bachtin, whenever his love toward the grotesque springs up, that grotesque laughter which brings both Kantor and Bachtin to Rabelais.
In his shows, Kantor connects the elements, even the most tragic elements into a funny humorous, grotesque manifestation- and here we come to his notion of minimalist performances, autonomous and divided scenes which could- each of them stand by itself as a minimalist fragment, but later connected by the fine line of grotesque humor into an entity as is the case with the Dead Class.

Each fragment/scene from the Dead Class could stand as a mini performance of its own where actors are exposed in a phenomenological net, as some special objects, mannequins who are in fact the objects predestined to relate to one another in a phenomenological manner. Here he comes close to another giant of the postmodern theater, the American director Richard Foreman who had a similar approach to his theater sets and his actors in his Ontological-Hysterical Theater. However, Foreman’s theater is Ontological in terms of placing his actors/playful objects within a middle-class semantic field, filled out with angst and memories of his bountiful reality whereas Kantor’s theater is a painful historic memory of the European past filled with battles and wars. And where Foreman offers us a Barbie doll as a memory of an abused childhood- in a memory of Vienna secession and Freud, Kantor turns a man with a hat into an object leading yet another much older creature by his hand who turns out to be an epitome of European History- a blind object leads yet another blind thing.

As it is very difficult (in terms of scenography), to set into motion all these very precise Dadaist objects, and as it is already very problematic for actors cum objects and objects cum actors (as Kantor would have it) to create and sustain the inner story of such a phenomenological play, both of these directors have never believed in improvisation in theater. Hardly they both believed in a coherent and contingent story in a play as their miniature fragmented scenes could be taken as a series of separate performances in themselves. However, as Kantor’s Polish reality of the 1960s and 1970s appears more politically restrictive, Stalinian and suffocating than Foreman’s American one, Kantor’s metaphors- as they are being thrust upon the spectator- are more somber and raw in their appearance. Kantor is obsessed with the relationships between art and life and he claims that “the problem of art is always essentially the problem of the presence of an object. As the abstraction is a formal lack of an object which exists outside the picture”, he employs the intricate net of associations which bring the spectators back to an object, as exemplified in his Dead Class.

In the opening of Kantor’s Wax Museum of human dolls and mannequins, the number of the said objects turned into people keep raising their hands, as if they had something to ask, as if they had
something to say. But they are not capable of telling the story, or the murky History of the man whose soul died under the Communist boot and censorship.

And when they start uttering words and semi-coherent sentences, their declarations are unimportant and non-sensical, as they turn around in circle or in circles around the bench. However, Kantor obtains in his staging process a certain neutrality of his object which becomes in turn an independent semantic sign, like Duchamp’s “Fountain-urinoir”, a recyclable “ready-made”. In his Cricot 2 Theater he treats the text also as an organic “ready-made” object, ready to be manipulated by an actor.

Kantor per se has never believed in “props”, as his view of his object had always had a strictly political, utilitarian role- it was there, made to be ready to jump into action and break the frontier between the representation and the spectator. And then there was his WATERHEN: after this particular performance the objects enhance their phenomenology status- they gain on their proper meanings and significance, they speak for themselves, their roles are totally equal even competing with the roles of actors who, in turn, become things.

Kantor provokes the spectator with his objects, and although they are sparse and not numerous on stage, they are disturbing. He does not believe in illusion and he draws the spectator in right away: in media res- he learnt from Piscator that supreme lesson in disturbing the voyeur and he will not let him dream- if his spectator is lulled to sleep, he will make sure that by the end of the show, his dream becomes a nightmare.

Bablet nicely remarqued that Kantor’s performance is not a can that a spectator can open every evening and be served there the same, tasty meal: Kantor invites his audience to join his stage, but unlike the Living Theater (also the adepts of Piscator)he does not impose his political vision on them, nor he lures the spectator to construct or deconstruct the stage mentally (the way that Foreman, the Brechtian soul would do). Kantor invents the semantic game and sets it on the stage resembling a chess-field where he invites you for a rollercoaster ride (each slope is a different chapter in History full of wars, slaughterhouses, inner prisons and censorship). And so as not to sound or appear sordid in all his gore reveling, he introduces Rabelaisian humor to it, decadent prostitutes turned into dolls, minimalist boxes (or prison-houses?) where all shades of grey, black and white parade in their splendor... AND SO ON AND FORTH

--hope i didn’t bore you, but if i had snore you, sorry, just wanted to tell you not to think of me, yr friend nina zee, as a wastebin of ideas.