

Curator's Guide to "Tadeusz Kantor: Inbetween Structures" exhibition

Tadeusz Kantor: Inbetween Structures

Curated by Marc Gloede

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Summerhall

Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990) is best known as an outstanding and highly original figure of 20th century theatre, as well as the creator of his own theatre group and of productions imbued with poetry derived from his own complex Galician origin. He is also known for being one of the most important figures of the Krakow art scene and arguably the most prominent representative of the informel art movement in Poland. Kantor is also credited with inventing and naming the medium of emballage (from French 'emballer' – 'to wrap'), a practice of wrapping up various objects, which defined his art works following the informel period.

Celebrating the centenary of Tadeusz Kantor's birth, the exhibition Tadeusz Kantor: Inbetween Structures brings a new perspective to Kantor's complex theatrical, cinematic and visual oeuvre. Focusing on the early phase of Kantor's artistic career (1954–1965), the exhibited works (which include the long lost film Attention!... painting as well as numerous drawings, gouaches, paintings, collages, photographs and written manifestoes), not only highlight the profundity of his early art, but also shed new light on the international perception of Kantor as a visual artist.

It is crucial to understand that Kantor's visual works were equally important to him as his theatrical productions. All of his works are explorations of intense artistic processes that were leading in different directions and structures. Choosing the actual form of a work was never random but very carefully decided upon.

This wide artistic oeuvre displayed as part of Tadeusz Kantor: Inbetween Structures reveals the complexity of Kantor's ideas about art and forges a new perspective on his playful approach to bridging the gaps between art forms as well as working creatively in-between these fields and the structures of art. His capacity of moving through existing categories and forms is quite unparalleled to other artistic practices of the time. The exhibition Tadeusz Kantor: Inbetween Structures will not only foster a fresh look at one of the masters of modern Polish art but will also raise an understanding of the unmatched creative and open atmosphere that existed in Poland in the years 1955–1959.

Tadeusz Kantor
Pensiture 40, Figure, 1959
Oil on canvas

Tadeusz Kantor was the most important artists to introduce the idea of informel to Poland in the late 1950s and early 60s. Within this period Kantor and other artists allowed full freedom of expression to the unforeseen qualities of different materials. The gestures in these works seem random, but were intended to reject the usual concepts of drawing and control. Informel works of Kantor were avoiding the traditional concepts of painting and its development that evolves from the idea to the completed work via sketches and projects. Pensiture 40 – Figura is a perfect example for this period – an open work that the observer needs to read as freely as possible, forgetting established conventions and education.

Tadeusz Kantor
Informel series
Undated
Works on paper

While the informel paintings of Kantor often quite directly resonate with the Informalism that we find in France or Germany during the 1950s and the 1960s, his informel drawings open up a completely different dimension. Here Kantor divides the sheets of paper in segments and creates certain serialities. In this way he is developing a form that at first glance is reminiscent of comic strips or filmic story boards – very concrete and not informel at all. But what seems to be the most interesting in this context is that the longer we look at these works the less we see. Formerly acknowledged figures begin to dissolve and narrative structures fall apart. The longer our eyes move through Kantor’s drawn informel worlds the less we are capable of recognising it. We begin to understand that for Kantor producing as well as perceiving these works is not about what we already know but more about how we are capable of getting creative with what we see.

Tadeusz Kantor
Tachism Drawing Series
Undated
Works on paper

Like Informalism, Tachism can be read as a reaction to the well-established forms of painting in the first half of the 20th century. While we see the similarities in both forms in abandoning geometric abstraction and favouring a more intuitive form of expression, some differences between these forms become very clear in the work of Kantor. While his informel works were tending more towards abstraction in which the materiality became a key element, in his tachist works Kantor tended more towards a graphic dimension. These drawings unfolded a field of the unconscious by pending between Japanese calligraphic works, prints,

and images from Rorschach inkblot tests. While the Rorschach test is used to examine a person's personality characteristics and emotional state of mind, Kantor's tachistic works seem to turn this idea around and lead into a field of decategorization and dysfunction.

Tadeusz Kantor
Emballage Series
var. materials
and
Monsieur Anonyme, 1978
var. materials

For Kantor objects always played a crucial role. They became especially important when his artistic practice moved further, towards a point where he was aiming to reach beyond painting. In the use and his concept of objects, we can see a very direct and intense influence on his happenings and his theatrical work. At the same time relating to the object in his painterly work was also a very long and intense discourse.

In his paintings, even though Kantor was picking up a thread that was established by Duchamp and his idea of the ready-made, he came up with his very own idea of the ready-made object. To achieve this he needed an object of the lowest rank, an object that was common, useless, meaningless, which only after bringing it into the realm of art, gained a new meaning.

By using this kind of objects to create numerous assemblages and emballages – half-spatial compositions in which pre-used, often destroyed objects, like envelopes, bags, and umbrellas were applied to the canvas – Kantor was transforming the paintings into reliefs. He created forms that were constantly oscillating between the flatness of a painting and the spatiality of an object.

Tadeusz Kantor, Mieczysław Waśkowski, Adam Nurzyński
Attention!... Painting, 1958
(Uwaga!... malarstwo)
16mm film, colour/sound

In 1958, together with two graduates of the Łódź Film School – directors Mieczysław Waśkowski and Adam Nurzyński – Tadeusz Kantor expanded his ideas and artistic practices further towards the moving image. The dynamics and the process of creating an artwork, which had already played a key role in his informel paintings, now found a new space and challenge: a short film called Attention!... Painting. It is a colourful, painting-like moving image, which starts to unfold in front of our eyes. Clearly, this film resonates with questions that Kantor had developed in response to paintings of Jackson Pollock and to the film on Pollock that was made in the beginning of the 1950s by Hans Namuth. In contrast to the film by Namuth, Attention!... Painting is never focusing on the artist. Kantor is not interested in creating the classical myth of the genius artist by appearing in

front of the camera. His focus was on creating a cinematic painting, which starts to unfold in front of our eyes – a painting in time. At that point in time Kantor is clearly less interested in the actual art-object and more in the process of the creative momentum. The intense experience of this experimental film, combined with an interesting electronic sound was so striking that the film was awarded at the Venice Film Festival in 1958.

Tadeusz Kantor
Attention Painting Drawing Series
Undated
Works on paper

A wonderful example for the title of this exhibition – Inbetween Structures – are Tadeusz Kantor's drawings that he created for / during Attention Painting. The drawings correspond to a certain extent with Kantor's own informal drawings, while at the same time they can be understood as technical or processual drawings. Kantor does not perceive combining these two dynamics as counter-productive or mutually exclusive but more of a trigger to get playful and creative. Kantor was exploiting art's ability to refocus on streams of information and at the same time to embrace informal aspects in a chain of experimentation. These drawings give an insight into Kantor's own multi-layered approach to the film while also unfolding an aesthetic appeal. The combination of technical questions with aesthetic effects here results in an interesting form somewhere in-between. Not a weak form that comes out of an undecided momentum, but a strong creation of drawings, that have a formal position in their own right.

Tadeusz Kantor
Popular Exhibition
1963
var. works

A crucial point in Kantor's artistic development was the so-called Popular Exhibition (or Anti-Exhibition), which Tadeusz Kantor created in the Krzysztofory Gallery in 1963. The artist was using the gallery's space – a dark cellar with a very prominent brick finish – to present drawings, copies of drawings, costumes, objects, and photographs. There was no distinguishable hierarchy between the exhibited works. On the contrary, visitors could see works of art e.g. drawing hanging on washing lines confronting Kantor's everyday personal belongings. Everyday life (with its common objects and triviality) was meeting with works art. The complexity of this exhibition and its development can be captured in the variety of different materials and forms that Kantor was working with. We find drawings on photographs, manifestos, and collages, all echoing his ambition to go beyond any clichematic experience.

In the manifesto that accompanied the exhibition, Kantor wrote:

THE EXHIBITION / loses its former indifferent function /of presenting and documenting, and becomes / an ACTIVE SETTING, / engaging the viewer in the

adventures and traps / that deny and don't satisfy/ his being as a spectator, / watching and exploring.

THE EXHIBIT / consists of a «ready-made» reality / that is my own work and past, / foreign and objectified / by mixing it with the subject / matter of life.

Eustachy Kossakowski

Popular Exhibition, Krzysztofory Gallery, Kraków 1963

6 b/w photographs

Eustachy Kossakowski tried to capture Tadeusz Kantor's intention of the Popular Exhibition in a beautiful series of photographs he made while the show was up and running in 1963. When we look at these pictures, we are not only getting a sense of the atmosphere Kantor created in this very specific architectural environment, but we can also clearly understand how this exhibition was a move to overcome certain conventions of the art-system in that time. In Kossakowski's photographs we see that this was established by concentrating on one side different threads and questions that Kantor was working on almost at the same time. On the other side it becomes evident in these images how intensely Kantor was staging or curating his own works. Presentation for Kantor was always a key momentum in all spheres of his artistic work. With the Popular Exhibition he made that very clear and moved further towards something that he would later call a zero zone.

Tadeusz Kantor

Manifestos and Writings

var. works on paper

It is important to understand Kantor's role as a critical thinker and artist, continuously contributing to the international art discourse of his time. His writings, which often took the form of a written statement or a manifesto, were not only developed parallel to his artistic practice and read by art historians or scholars of performance studies. Actually his writings regularly became a crucial part of his own artistic presentations.

Often his writings took the form of a classical written manifesto on a sheet of paper published in traditional books format but equally Kantor often decided that they should become a collage or wall text in an installation or an exhibition. In this way Kantor's manifestoes became interesting combinations, addressing theoretical dimensions or questions, while at the same time challenging the role of a text in the arts. This dimension becomes very palpable when Kantor e.g. glues his typed manifesto of the Popular Exhibition on a canvas or creates a collage with the text and exhibits it later as an artwork.

Marc Gloede

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