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POLITICS OF APPEARANCE: Tadeusz Kantor's art in Sweden 1958 - 2018

The Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990) has been recognized for his multifaceted oeuvre of painting, installation, objects, set design, happening, theatre directing, manifestos, and theoretical and critical writing. His early paintings and theatre, in the 1930-40s, was devoted to Symbolism. Successively, his practice developed by means of Constructivism and Surrealism into abstraction, and continued to transform in the post-war period from a Modernist formal language into Postmodernism. Kantor's art in that period was devoted to collage, assemblage, objects, happenings, and theatre. Throughout his career Kantor returned to themes of memory, history, and death. And he continuously made use of drawing as an artistic expression.

Throughout his life Kantor was based in Krakow. Compared to many of his Polish artist fellows at the time, he travelled extensively to Western countries such as France, Italy, (West) Germany, Great Britain, US, and Scandinavia. His presence and legacy in several European countries has been researched and analyzed, mainly in terms of comparisons of artistic influences. Yet, scholars specialized on Kantor have so far overlooked his presence in Scandinavia, even though he early on exhibited and realized experimental artworks in that geographical area. Additionally, his presence in the Scandinavian countries has not been recognized in the art history writing of that particular area. This double omission of Kantor's practice has been the starting point for this doctoral thesis.

By mapping and contextualizing the presence of his art specifically in Sweden from 1958 up until today, the thesis aims to investigate the reception of Kantor's art. An overarching interest is to challenge a hegemonic Western-Eurocentric art history that my initial research has brought into light. The thesis adopts the imperative of insisting on a situated model of analysis of individual artists where time and place will be taken

into account in order to avoid Universalist models of Art History. This field of research is inscribed in a larger discussion of remembrance and oblivion of the construction of art history and its hierarchical structures of canonization (DaCosta Kaufmann, Dossin, and Joyeux-Prunel, eds., *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, 2015).

The specific aim of this paper is to discuss the model of a “horizontal” reading of art history, introduced as a critical contribution to current methodological debate by late art historian Piotr Piotrowski. The paper will ask how this model can be used without implementing too broad categories and binary relationships, where the specificity of particular artists is overshadowed by acknowledging an east–west divide? A question in line with Agata Jakubowska’s discussion in “Personalizing the Global History of Pop Art. Alina Szapocznikow and Maria Pinińska-Bereś” in *Art in Transfer* (Öhrner, ed. 2017). The model of center and periphery, used in critical art geography, will be used as a theoretical tool to unpack a particular Polish artist in the context of Scandinavia. Reversely, the case of Tadeusz Kantor can also be used to challenge and qualify this model, in favour for a more “multifocal and polyphonic set of relations”, to again, refer to Jakobowska.

The history of Kantor is instrumental in this case as he travelled and worked extensively abroad, but always remained engaged locally. Furthermore, my initial research on the presence of Kantor’s art in Sweden, over the six decades from late 1950’s onwards, shows that his nationality has been both an obstacle and an advantage for the reception of his art and theatre works. This leads me to a tentative conclusion - close readings on micro levels need to be taken into consideration when larger structures are being conceptualised and scrutinized. One pertinent and “hands on” question of methodological relevance, for the Berlin International Forum, would be how to join these two levels of research.