



For I Do Not Know How to Act: Tadeusz Kantor and the Reality of Theatre

Thanos Zartaloudis¹

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion, in honour of the late Ari Hirvonen, of the reality of theatre, the space of the tragic and the ethical condition. It engages critically with Hirvonen's work, as he would demand it, and in doing so it considers the distinctive thinking about theatrical reality in the work of the great Polish artist and theatre director Tadeusz Kantor.

Keywords Theatre · Kantor · Hirvonen · Tragedy · Ethics

Continuous Unfolding in the Present

At times one thinks better when unprepared. While anticipating a mundane shift of sorts, such as when at a train station, one can enter a temporary zone seemingly staged outside of time, a momentary shabbat. Unprepared for, undemanding, a minor time–space such as this can be a reflective experience on the reality of *taking place*. In contrast to the loudhailers of power structures projecting a God-creator, a Master-builder, an Actor etc., ‘taking place’ can be better studied during those minor disarming moments. Finding yourself in such a zone can shift or numb your body from whatever purpose or end it is about to pursue, even if for a moment, and can lay bare a multiplicity of spaces within space, times within time, which is to say in a sense: dead space and time.

University of Kent, Kent Law School and Kent's Interdisciplinary Centre for Spatial Studies. To Ari's family and friends. With many thanks to: Angus McDonald for encouraging me to put this in writing when it was not easy; Anton Schütz for his generosity and close reading of an earlier version; to my late father who first introduced me to theatre and its force; and to Emilie, Rémi and Félix, the Trio Radegundis. With special thanks to the superbly gifted, set and costume designer, Clío Boboti who first introduced me to the work of T. Kantor.

✉ Thanos Zartaloudis
t.zartaloudis@kent.ac.uk

¹ Kent Law School and Kent's Interdisciplinary Centre for Spatial Studies, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

This can disrupt the staging-of-meaning by exposing the performativity of every act in an idle, meaningless moment. Not exterior and not centre-stage yet, more to the corner of the scene. It is known that existence *takes* place prior to whatever comes next to settle or describe it (a persona, a language, a vocation, a rule, a myth of origin etc.). Yet so overshadowed it remains, almost forgotten. This experience of *taking* place, ex-istence, somehow outside-inside is neither bound to a purpose (a destiny or essence), nor is it partaking into a void, a nothingness. The time–space of taking place is the plane of a minor shabbat where being and non-being, thingness and no-thingness become inseparable, for a minor duration, reminding one how mechanic *and* organic one is, a gracious meaningless no-thing.

Nothingness is not the nihilistic negation of thingness. This is akin, in post-dramatic theatre terms, to what Heiner Müller described as staging ‘a landscape beyond death,’ without concealing its inevitable origin in death behind some logic of textual or scenic illusion.¹ It could be described as a *heterarchic* event (McCulloch 1945) that renders theatre ‘fully autonomous’ (a notion of the Polish artist and theatre director Tadeusz Kantor to whom I turn below). A continuous present between remembrance and forgetting, deprived of fixed meaning and sense, a near zero state, a state of permanent decay (a being in ruin). Yet this is the only available stage where presence is rendered impossibly possible and reclaimed. Art is not re-presenting reality or liveness, it already *lives* in the dimension of ruin, it *is* the dimension of an impossible possibility, an unlikely presence. ‘The sea. The fact of its presence is always overwhelming—to some even unbearable. To make the sea still more present. We doubtless enter the region of the Impossible (to use Kantor’s term)’ (Hanna Ptazkowska cited in Kantor 1967, p. 8). An exposure of use, rendering things immune to their stop-motion functionality, their cognisability. Holding things suspended in their fixed thingness, the melodrama of meaning attempts to halt the continuity of mediation (of being, reality etc.).

It may be worth considering post-dramatic theatre as radically autopoietic in this manner.² Modern dramaturgy rendered, each time, the autopoietic *taking place* of things less real and complex on the basis of its projected explanation-resolution represented on stage (a supposedly necessary illusion of directed meaning that takes the place of the real on stage). To let theatre break free of such illusion-making, it must be admitted that the starting point is defeat, an anti-heroic origin. Heroic illusion attempts to limit exposure to the plane of coming to existence, of taking place as no-thing whose reality is not predetermined. A post-dramatic theatre rejects heroes, and in this sense it also rejects tragedy at least in its conventional sense (for tragedy cannot be systemic in the sense of a programme of representation). It is of interest that Kantor, with whom I engage later more directly, placed a critical rejection of the Odyssean tragedy at the heart of his artistic work. The conventional tragic element

¹ See Müller 1986.

² Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in *Autopoiesis and Cognition: the Realization of the Living* (1980), developed this notion as the essential characteristic of living beings. Here I refer to it in the sense developed by Niklas Luhmann in relation to matters of society. For earlier autopoieticists, living beings remained individualised so that ‘society’ is composed by individuals. An autopoietic system is a system that produces and reproduces its own elements, as well as its own structures (Luhmann 2012, p. 32), yet these cannot be predetermined by an individualist (or universal) logic.

of the epic is rejected and Odysseus is deheroised. At the same time what emerges out of this practice is not a new heroic system, some outer realm that would replace or correct the 'present' order.

For Kantor, as it will be suggested, the annihilation of heroic representative meaning in post-dramatic theatre, whereby thingness and no-thingness become indistinguishable, is the strategy that renders anything that attempts to order a story on the theatrical stage superficial (i.e. as an enactment of truth, resolution, a tragic justice). By exposing the repetition of presence Kantor aims to render everything a repetition of being in ruins, whereby everything can become an object in this experimental theatrical sense and in this way be reclaimed (or profaned, to use Agamben's term).³ Reality, now exposed on stage, does not overcome however the 'consciousness of our defeat', it endlessly repeats it and in this way reclaims the spatiality of reality without hierarchy or the tragic melodrama of a catharsis of meaning and identity.⁴ To affirm the *nothingness* of things means to acknowledge the poverty (and comedy) of reality. To find in reality, what is not of (this) reality. To think in scenes, rather than representations.⁵

To expose the event of the scene in each re-presentation, one needs to learn to forget the projections that are made in order to assure one that they know how to act in advance. In order to do (or contemplate doing) anything whatsoever, one accomplishes first an action that sets the scene, the context of taking place as such, which means that every act remains irreparably an ethical singularity (for there is no con-text). What repeats in each action, as it takes place, is not the representation of some place, origin, intention or essence but the exposure of an ethical singularity, puppet like, poor of meaning in its taking place. Truth, law, desire-machines are big industries of pushing the factum of poverty aside (the absence of a destiny, thingness or essence) by filling the gaping void with mannequins of represented meaning. The production of reality in this manner must veil its taking place, objectifying some things but not the ones that supposedly act as the exterior source of every value, meaning, action. In this manner, what takes place on stage is set up as an illusion (never truly autonomous from the truth-setting that pre-exists it), receding (a self-contradicting concealment) the real action of making an Act. Human beings inhabit a world where the two planes of existence (world reality and expressive or enacted reality as an illusion or copy) are hermetically closed upon themselves, yet form a complete circle. Every act is an act upon another act.

After the fact of the act, critique, or in theatrical terms, the experience of the audience through the illusion of a staged representation becomes equated to a passive receptacle. Critique as the *experience* of an action can more modestly, however, turn one's mind to the waiting area (a continuous present) of each performance, a waiting area of no-thingness. The experience of imperfection in encounters that are made in real time whether scripted or unscripted, idle chats as much as institutional processes, could then admit their gracious defeat as their starting point. The comic finitude of all decisions, conversions, translations, daily exercises in mishearing

³ On profanation, see Agamben 2007.

⁴ On this experimentation, see Kantor's understanding of death in 'The Theatre of Death' (1975).

⁵ On the critique of representation, see Lehmann 2006.

acoustics, place a shadow of strangeness over our staged dramas of the ‘world’. Events, including legal events have, in their diversity, their own interacting trajectories that fold and unfold over time in unpredictable ways. Their supposed prescriptive materialisation is always dyed by some alchemy, a scene-creation pushed aside, reduced by functional essentialists in order to place emphasis on the supposed outcome or resolution; to close a case, to enact a decision.

Late modernity has overachieved this long-term cinematic effect by the narcissistic technical reproduction of decisions, targets, products, feelings, institutional forms, and so forth, as fulfillments of principles rather than as acts in themselves. It has done so by overcoming the old schema of the supposed chasm between two realities. Surpassing its very own presupposed scission between world reality and staged reality, late modernity knows that technical reproduction is attractive to a mass audience because of its functionalist stability, but it is no longer needed to pretend that this is externally sourced, that a reality is being represented. Increasingly attractive as a massive scale tranquilisation, it more and more admits that it shall never offer a homecoming or an exodus since it can only be a supplement to the insistence on recurrent patterns, justifying autoregressive models of thinking and acting. Production and its power (reproducibility) from the Latin *producere*, the experience of ‘leading or bringing forth, drawing out, extending’, has for a long time become a process of algorithmic repetition of the same (‘law’, ‘democracy’, ‘market’, ‘freedom’ and so forth gradually, and tellingly, becoming irrevocably used while their earlier meaning is called for but out-of-use). One must become increasingly more creative to notice the ‘fuss, commotion’ (interestingly originating in theatre production) that indicates the co-existent abyssal no-thingness of things in their earthly real being, as it can become evident in the discordance upon hearing, at times, your voice saying ‘I’.

Generator Weird

‘I dunno what the hell’s in there, but it’s weird and pissed off, whatever it is.’ (Carpenter 1982; Clark: [30:15]). The late Ari Hirvonen crafts the opening of his *Ethics of Tragedy—Dwelling, Thinking, Measuring* (2020) with a reference to John Carpenter’s iconic film *The Thing*. While the question of what is ‘the Thing?’ may come to occupy the mind of the viewer as a naturalised instinct towards some identification, Clark’s gut reaction focuses on the fact that irrespective of what ‘it’ may be, it is ‘weird and pissed off’. This could symbolically point at what *matters* the Thing, against the ‘precorporation’ of ‘the horizon of the thinkable’ towards this or that essential meaning or identity, as the late Mark Fisher put it (2008, pp. 6, 8). Carpenter’s Thing is so disarmingly inaccessible, it is no-thing, that it eventually disarms all identity. The no-thing of our existence, its lack of essential meaning and destination, inspires such dread of the finite and its continuous present. Our weird (because of the intolerable weight of false expectations layered upon a supposed essence of humanity) no-thingness (existence) has always been a most fascinating experience that finds expression in language or art.

That is, through an experience of mourning non-identity, its once tellingly characterised ‘brute fact’ of existence. Lacking an identity, an essential determination, the old system presupposed a correspondence (a communication, a reproduction) the sent us down the spirals of higher and higher riches in some external reality. Yet, in late modernity existential poverty is increasingly dubbed by a narcissistic turn towards a self, an extreme individualism, that desires to be detachable from the reality of the world, becoming consumed, self-destructively, into the performance of a persona. This peculiar species reflects, now, only through an apostrophe (from the Greek *apostrophē*, a ‘turning away’).⁶ ‘Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness.’ (Johnson 1986, p. 30).⁷ Perhaps for this reason at times we feel as if we have been perennially pissed off, though not enough to break character. Anxiety and anger, however, find little mitigation without observing their comic condition.

It is perhaps not strange that the word ‘weird’ which today tends to signify the strange and the uncanny, is, in contrast, etymologically linked to the power, or agency by which events are predetermined. This sense of predetermination is historically linked to the Fates and its sense remains evident in the Old English *wyrd* ‘fate, chance, fortune’ (Douglas 2018, ‘weird’, adj.). The anxiety of the indeterminate is however generated by the unrealistic expectations of its predetermination. A historically dominant and self-contradictory reaction to our weird condition (denying at whatever cost our feeling absent from ourselves as we act out ourselves), is a coping mechanism that chooses to hum the beat of a playback track. Yet, the point here is not to suggest that one could break away from such a series of dis/continuation, such forms of supposed predetermination, or even the false hope of stability, in the name of an exodus, a return to Ithaca where all can be at ease, proper and just. For this is precisely what is presupposed in the negative bond between world and illusion, it is this expectation of an endpoint that plays out its antidote stability in the meantime. It remains a symptom of sterile narcissism to maintain for another realm where justice can be served, where the self finds its Ithaca. Such self-proclaimed ‘critical strategies’ are the projections of a performative self-dissonance in denial. Yet, it is also a symptom of sterile narcissism to maintain that one could escape or ignore the series of the world, the scenes at play. The ethical question for our species is tragic in a sense because while we are irreparably without destiny and essential predetermination, the series of events, traditions, languages, laws and so forth that take the place of destiny, cannot be ignored as acts. Our ethical consistency needs to every time measure itself.

Reality ever-pulsating, cracks can appear in a character or other fantasy and can expose glitches in our apostrophic ventriloquism. Yet even then anxious to avoid an *encounter* with reality one invents a *machine* of improvisation. Each time turning apertures into narcissistic crises that need to be mended. Such false-consciousness feeds an existential parody turning us into self-allegorising entities. Expression

⁶ From *strephein*: a turn or an act of turning away; Greek *strophos*: ‘a cord’; in rhetoric as a trope it indicates the turning away of a writer or speaker toward an absent audience, often the gods or the dead.

⁷ See Usher 2010.

having ultimately released itself from (ethical) necessity, masquerades as a freedom that in truth is only interested in defending its own sterile and unmitigated narcissism.

Hirvonen writes: ‘The lack of fate, the distance from (an essential, *my addition*) nature is peculiar to the moderns. Even death is a silent exile. They are masters of pathos and desire for the infinite and limitlessness, which are foreign elements to them. The paradox remains the same; how to adopt one’s own by distancing from one’s own.’ (2020, p. 43).⁸ Preventing this condition from becoming a false paradox (as in the old-European ‘imaginary identification with the nation, race, soil, the people, ideology, progress’; *ibid.*, p. 170; or in the late modern continuous crisis of such identification as the ultimate defence of identification) requires not yet another theory of separation anxiety from some unrepresentable foundation, but instead an appreciation of the indifference of origin which demands that one considers the inner consistency between what they think and desire and what they do. In the alleged absence of any necessities in late capitalism and the autoimmune narcissism that folds every limit, every necessity from being seen or talked about, the ethical question appears absent from any inventory (whether moral, legal, philosophical). For Hirvonen, noticing the *passage-à-la-limite* of tragedy as a theatrical (rather than philosophical) experience can indicate the ethical experience of measuring, of consistency. I would like to explore here how that may be so.

Hirvonen asks: ‘How can we rethink the concept of the limit freed from capitalist arrogance and its alleged necessities? What could be the future meaning of measure and measuring? These questions come back to the question of the possibility of a dissensual ethics, one that has a force of resistance and includes a transformative power.’ (*ibid.*, p. 12). Yet, a ‘dissensual ethics’, can easily become something totally other: an esoteric disciplinary programme. Hirvonen follows a philosophical path charted by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jacques Lacan whereby philosophy is set before the tragic.⁹ In which of the two senses of the word ‘before’ becomes crucial. Lacoue-Labarthe names Lacan’s re-elaboration of ethics an arche-ethics (*archi-éthique*) (1991, p. 23). A task set for ethics by philosophy, however, ultimately distances itself from ethics in the sense of the ethical event as an experience of acting that needs to confront its necessity suspending all else.

Each time, it seems, fields of knowledge and disciplinary programmes have attempted to fix anchor points for the ethical experience in order to rule it, for better or worse.¹⁰ It is through noticing the interval between impulse, event and reflection or decision, that one encounters a wall, a reality (the Latin [*inter-*]vallum being etymologically related to the English word wall). The singular task demanded by an urgent situation, gets tangled with the (various disciplinary) distinctions of the

⁸ As Hirvonen puts in, with Martin Heidegger in mind, ‘Tragedy is about being-unhomely and becoming-homely of the extraordinary being (*Seiende*), which is also a site where the ethics of tragedy takes place if it is to take place.’; 2020, p. 143.

⁹ See Lacan 1992.

¹⁰ Hirvonen writes: ‘Morality refers to acting in accordance with the established moral and juridical laws of the state. Ethics, in contrast, is beyond this kind of moral legality, and also beyond the concept of the good that would be actualised in the norms and commandments of the moral law.’; 2020, 16.

‘good’ or the ‘just’. Inevitably one may seek anchor points. Yet there are no anchor points for the ethical experience, in the sense of a real exception, an urgent matter that requires action. To turn to philosophy as the ultimate foundation of ethics, or law, religion and morality, is a well-trodden attempt to think of the ethical experience by fortifying the separation of the ethical event from a programme of ethics, the stage from its audience.

For Hirvonen, the sense of an ethical task is, however, to be formed as a *philosophical* ethics.¹¹ Hirvonen aims to ‘cross the line’ (*franchir la ligne*; *ibid.*), to intersect the horizon of the ‘good’, in order to reanimate desire, that weird ‘Thing’. One today does not encounter that much of ‘arrogance and the allegation of necessities’ in capitalist neoliberalism (the target of Hirvonen’s), but rather the replacement of arrogance by narcissism and the allegation’s reversal—what is alleged is the *absence* of necessities (and hence of any ethical demands). Philosophy may have offered us ways of thinking the paradoxes within which we inhabit ourselves, but it cannot but misplace the ethical, if it is to philosophically preset its stage and the relations the stage produces. Philosophy can think the ethical event, but it cannot guide it. In the irrevocable context of our weird poverty (our indeterminate ‘fate’), the experience of an ethical demand in a particular situation cannot derive from the inventory of a discipline or a field of knowledge. The moment an ethical act is inventorised, the ethical moment has already reached its closure.

So fearful of the place where there is no-thing, we employ for centuries inventories, with this or that tint of foundationalism to procure a categorisation of tasks or fates measured by degrees of separation (such as the separation of the operations of law from their critique, the separation of the political from politics, faith from religion, reality from artistic expression, nature from humanity).¹² Such a cartography of degrees of separation has been engaged many times in the history of critical thought (including within legal studies). The necessity of a decisive act that the ethical experience can demand does not conform to such separations. A prefabricated narcissistic horizon of the possible, strives to always arrive at the scene before the event, so to stage tragedy as a neurosis. Yet, the response to this cannot be to place the tragic sense of lived experience, philosophically, and still call it ethics. Tragedy (or the ethical event) is intimately wild, it forces the metamorphosis of the self.

¹¹ ‘A philosophical ethics differs from social and legal sciences, which investigate social and political problems and institutional and normative orders. I would discern five main tasks for a philosophical ethics. First, it ought to point out the urgent need for orientation towards solidarity and responsible action. Second, it has to consider a non-metaphysical essence of measure and limit; and consider the possibility of disclosing measures and limits, which can exist to experience being-in-the world. Third, it must show how and why ethical experience is not dictated by transcendental entities (onto-theology), the monology of practical reason (deontological ethics), the calculation of happiness (utilitarianism), or deliberative dialogue (discursive and procedural ethics). [...]. Fourth, ethics attempts to bring forth the disclosure and withdrawal of the experience of attuned responsibility here on the earth. Fifth, this ethics cannot be translated into a teachable code of conduct or a cannon of commandments that would issue from it. These five tasks can be condensed into one sentence that sets the task for thinking: philosophical ethics reveals “a nonmetaphysical description of our *ethos* as forms of a measure that exists *on earth*.”’; Hirvonen 2020, p. 15; quoting in the last sentence Werner Marx 1992, p. 67.

¹² It is perhaps of interest that fate is etymologically linked to the old English word *wyrd*, linked to the later word weird, from the hypothetical root **wer-* (2) ‘to turn, bend’, to become/transform; Harper 2018.

Hirvonen writes, with Hölderlin in mind, ‘intimacy does not mean “obliteration of distinctions. Intimacy names the belonging together of what is foreign, the ruling of the strange, the claim of awe.”’ (2020, p. 20). The ethical threshold prevails over us and our idols, but there one finds no purity and no catharsis. We do not know how to act.¹³

Garry: The generator’s gone.

MacReady: Any way we can we fix it?

Garry: It’s ‘gone’, MacReady (Carpenter 1982).

Skēno-thesia

Hirvonen, in *The Ethics of Tragedy: Dwelling, Thinking, Measuring* (2020), engages with theatre in the Ancient Greek tradition and the way in which it is taken up by thinkers in modernity towards considering what he calls the measuring of democracy, in the context of conceptions of political subjectivity, social conflict, and ethical deliberation (ibid., p. 39). The focus is at first sight more on tragedy than theatre, yet Hirvonen’s core proposition, in my reading, is that ‘The ethics of tragedy could easily remain another version of philosophical ethics if it ignored tragedy as theatre.’:

[...] the Greek term *theatron* refers to a place of and for seeing, a space for appearance. Theatre is not so much a space for tragedy, where the figuration of the figure takes place, but more about the spacing of a decision, action and judgment in the proximity to the tragic conflict. The tragic presentation, or the presencing of the tragic in the spacing of tragedy, opens a space for the ethical. Hence, the ethical is a taking place in the presencing of tragedy. In other words, tragedy leaves aside all representational images and transcendental ideas of goods and values as its spacing gives space to ethics and the spacing of ethics. That is, the theatre puts at the stage an ethics (ibid., p. 178).

This line of vision opens the way to a ‘thinking of justice’ as a ‘non-negotiable, unconditional, ungraspable, hyperbolic justice beyond moral and legal norms, beyond legitimacy and legality.’ (ibid., p. 191). The characterisations of ‘non-negotiable, unconditional, ungraspable, hyperbolic justice beyond moral and legal norms, beyond legitimacy and legality’ are characterisations that a philosophical approach to ethics could pose, largely concerned with its own presuppositions. In fact, such descriptors of tragic theatre and tragedy more generally project ‘justice’ as an outside, whereby theatre becomes a ‘place’ for its projection. In this sense, I wonder if Hirvonen’s schematics may reproduce the representational structure of what they aim to deconstruct.

I am particularly interested in this ‘spacing’ of appearance that Hirvonen presumes, the scene-production that leads to the staging of what he terms the ‘ethical’ in the first place. Not so much about the direction of the ‘decision’/‘position’ of the

¹³ What Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe called an ‘extimacy’; in Hirvonen 2020, p. 25 and see also n.42.

ethical and the way of life that it enables, but the *taking* place of its *presencing*. Such taking place is, for Hirvonen, an experience *of* the theatricality of measuring:

What takes place in tragedy is measuring itself as the human being measures itself, its action, its transgression, and its limited possibilities and the possibilities of limits. Measuring—the process, the motif, the subject, and the rhythm—is the concept upon which the poetry, tragedy, and thought intersect and share themselves. (ibid., p. 201).

Not a demonstration of justice as an absolute identity or principle, but an experience of scene-setting, a *skēnothesia* of each and every demonstration, whereby the theatricality of theatre is not side-lined as a mere technical means for the production of a narrative illusion, an identity, a fiction, principle or rule, that once more separates what is ‘staged’ from those that view it. For Hirvonen, we need to attend to the needs of thinking *theatre* because, as I understand it, it offers an experience of the becoming of things out of no-thingness; rather than in the way in which philosophical thinking has often appropriated theatre to produce sensible performances of its ideas. Neither out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), nor out of a thingness (an essence, identity, ‘justice’). For Hirvonen, theatricality shows, in this way, an ‘excess’: ‘What the philosophy of tragedy avoids or ignores, is always already present in tragedy. This is the excess of theatricality.’ (ibid., p. 206). From this ponders a self-resisting thinking of tragedy: ‘This self-resisting thinking of tragedy may construct the ethics of tragedy, not from its own premises but from the theatricality of tragedy.’ (ibid., p. 207). This is proximate to what I am thinking, here, but I am not as inclined to understand theatricality as an excess ‘as such,’ for an excess is always already too full of itself. Nor am I able to suggest that the tragic experience is characterised by a self-resisting thinking, whether philosophical or political, towards what Hirvonen imagines may be possible when ‘the democratic and communal being of theatre become actualized.’ (ibid., p. 208).¹⁴ My focus on theatre as scene-setting, via Kantor, is to be counterposed neither to textuality (as mere mediacy), nor materiality (or, as Hirvonen calls it, a naïve, immediate and spontaneous ‘nature’; ibid., p. 209). I explore a different though filial path to Hirvonen’s questioning, through initiating a conversation with the theatre and thinking of one of its greatest masters, Tadeusz Kantor. For Kantor, in one of his key theatrical gestures, the tragic event or theatricality is not an indication of pure matter, justice, or truth, but of their irreparable absence. An absence, however, that would be misconstrued if it were presumed as a lack; a lack which nonetheless projects either a past or future presence for itself. Presuming

¹⁴ Historically, Julie Stone Peters writes, ‘theatre and law were opposites. Theatre was the realm of artifice, ostentation, vulgar entertainment, melodrama, narcissistic self-display, hysteria, perfidy. Law was the realm of dispassionate reason, objectivity, discipline, and the sovereignty of truth.’; 2022, p. 43. Peters adds: ‘Ancient Athenians identified trials as tragedies, and likened legal speakers to actors: both actors and legal orators needed the art of *hypokrisis* (delivery), which outlined the proper use of voice, body, and movement. Ancient Romans elaborated on the likeness in their transformation of *hypokrisis* into the arts of *actio* (bodily action) and *pronuntiatio* (vocal expression). For them and their heirs, the theatre of law was where justice and truth might be revealed and enacted. In this sense, law itself was a ‘Theatre of Justice and Truth,’ as the title of Giovanni Battista de Luca’s magisterial treatise declared.’; ibid., p. 44. Yet, today, the terms of, for example, ‘justice’ or ‘truth’ no longer describe well, if they ever did, what takes place on the legal stage.

an ‘excess’ presupposes that it has a source and/or destination and hence that one day it could be fulfilled. Yet, for Kantor, one cannot find in the place where the excess supposedly can be witnessed (stage), anything else than a poverty.

Theatricality is not an excess but an irreparable poverty, neither fundamental (some original state we leave behind or an essence or nature to be one day fulfilled), nor excessive (in the sense of being out of this world). An intricate key to understand this further is the theatrically inhabited space called ‘the scene’. Understood in its spatial sense, Hirvonen writes, the scene ‘is and ... is not the stage’ (ibid., p. 216). It is the ‘place’ (Gr. *skēnē*) ‘where physical, symbolic and normative architecture, the real and imaginative spaces and their interactive co-existence evoke meanings and truths.’; or as he also strikingly describes it: ‘a light makeshift shelter ... a place of intimacy.’ (ibid., p. 217). The scene, for Hirvonen, is, in this sense, an ordinary political space (ibid., p. 224). I find that philosophy has been intrigued by theatre especially in modernity because it presumes that theatre becomes the enacted imagined place of immediate action, an identity that is sensed as otherwise impossible, at the price of thinking the scene of theatre as an exteriority, an excess.

For Kantor, the scene (*séance dramatique*) entails flat images, not representations or inner truths. The theatrical scene is not an illusion believed to be real by an audience who has been fooled. Instead, it is consistent with a possible world that is equally real. Theatricality does not imitate action in order to seduce, but becomes the exposure of the action of imitation as interior to ourselves. It becomes the experience on stage of an attempt at consistency between actions and their no-thingness, to the point of their inseparability, one that renders theatricality real. The abstraction of ‘reality,’ whereby the absence of a real object enables the tension that a theatrical illusion of it effects is exhausted. Kantor, instead, points to the object in its simplest form, a worn out everyday object bereft of its given life function, as it turns its face to the audience.

In Reality, But Not of It

Kantor renounced the conventional explanatory categories of a theatre of illusion and representation in his rereading of the tragic nature of theatricality. He experimented from 1944 to 1973 towards what he called, among else, an *ethical* account of the self as a condition of what he termed *real* (as opposed to ‘theatrical’) performance *in* theatre.¹⁵ Kantor’s multiple writings on his practices develop over the decades a complex and self-critical trope of doing and undoing theatre that could be indicated by the following line: *a commitment to being in reality, but not of it*.¹⁶ This also happens to sum my sense of the ethical experience invoked here. Both elemental curves are essential to this description: a consideration of an action’s relational consistency with the reality of the world as one finds itself in it is necessary (since there is no outside, totality, self-righteousness, or measure); while at the same time

¹⁵ See, for example, the characteristic plays: *The Dead Class*; *Wielopole, Wielopole*; *Let the Artists Die*; *I Shall Never Return*; and *Today Is My Birthday*.

¹⁶ For a very good introduction see the study by Kobialka 2009.

an ethical need or action cannot be neutered by whatever system of cognitive or normative regularity one may refer it to (this is the non-systemness species of nothingness, of ex-istence). An ethical commitment, the very nature of its experience, its energy, does not depend on or require any knowledge acquisition about 'ethics' or any measure that can then assess its effectiveness. Yet, while it is hermetically closed and not of reality, it forms a complete circle with it. Process-reality (systems) and happening-reality (non-systems) are supplements to each other.

The tragic when thought as based on the logic of re-presentation in the name of good, evil, law, non-law and so forth, projects a terror left behind that lurks to haunt, post-catastrophically, a negativity, setting reality (as truth) on the 'other' side of a desubjectification and loss. What becomes concrete, however, in such a modern trope is an aesthetic realm of semantics, not the 'real'. Reality is not pushed to its limits, for Kantor, since neither the self, nor its tragic loss become experienceable as anything other than an aesthetic transubstantiation. Hence the conventional critiques against representation remain, for Kantor, mostly stylistic/aesthetic gestures, strategies to cut one's losses. Not so dissimilarly, in critical legal studies, the place of critique is often placed in some realm that in the end remains largely detached from world-reality, a trope that does not deviate from this aestheticisation of the world. Instead, pushing reality and life to the limit, bereft of having to serve an essential purpose, yet aware of 'death's breath' and the reality one lives in, means standing against all that turns reality or life into a banal bingo hall; or, as Kantor writes in *Inferno*, an 'oversimplification'. Oversimplifications have each time animated the industrial-scale logic of brain 'commands' towards rational action, as well as contrarian viewpoints grounded in representational logics of naïve realism or excessive materialism. But theatre is not a form. Kantor writes:

I heard myself say:
 FURTHER ON, NOTHING!
 I left all the road signs
 behind me.
 I felt anger against
 history,
 trends,
 stages,
 theories.
 My journey acquired dimensions
 which were less and less material.
 The final frontier of the space
 started to recede and embraced
 a new, unknown dimension: imagination.
 Pure Imagination.
 FURTHER ON, NOTHING! We will see!¹⁷

A state of fluidity in the memory of the past, a continuous present, impermanence as the condition of living in the past as in the present, yet one that is a plane of a true

¹⁷ 'My Work-My Journey' in Kobialka 2009, pp. 1–26.

creative process rather than a negative relation to a void.¹⁸ Resistance to the affirmation of the ‘no-thing’, taking the form of an objectification or sacralisation of reality (mourning its loss as a form of truth that never faltered), has functioned to separate a supposed interiority in the self, so that one becomes essentially a subject who has to manage two personae, an interior and an exterior, one’s *zoē* (the illusion of necessity) and *bios* (the illusion of autonomy), chaining living to a psychologisation of an inner, tragic conflict whereby the self is constantly splitting from itself, instead of finding the means to keep unfolding.

This forms part of an attempt to not experience tragedy, to manage it by attempting to shell the fragility of our only poetic reality (our no-thingness, our lack of nature or destiny) by producing the illusion of living two lives, two realities. This necessitates theatre as an in-between place, which, as Kantor writes, is akin to a redundant *Post Office* (1963) circulating towards a hollow end, between an inner and exterior addressee. For Kantor, real theatre did not exist. Earlier theatre was pre-fabricated to love such constructions legitimating their belonging to reality by pretending to imitate another; or, equally, to critically (i.e. stylistically) distance themselves from it in order to preside over the space of illusion. Each time appropriating reality on a false premise of re-presentation (call it interpretation, representation, equivalence, utility, nihilism, critique etc.), whereby ‘in reality’ reality remains like a dreamt-up landscape.

For Kantor, reality is to become affirmatively visible, ‘annexed’ by a theatre that learns to experience itself, not as a replication of something but as a gesture of nothing (a subject that cannot be separated by an object, its no-thingness inseparable from its thingness). ‘The gesture,’ Agamben writes, ‘is the exhibition of mediality: it is a process of making a means visible as such.’ (2000, p. 57). For sure, such gestural conception of the exhibition of mediality can still fall within the realm of an over-aggregation and become an essential concept, akin to the ellipsis of ‘the ethical’ as some metaphysical plane or inventory. ‘True tragedy’ is, however, the mundane absence of returns in the short span of a human life, rendering the meaning of human life a continuous coupling, an engagement, an unfolding. Kantor writes: ‘I asked then if the return of Orpheus was possible./ A return to ‘our’ world./ But, there are no returns./ This is the tragic fate of a human.’¹⁹ Theatre resembles this fate best. The actors must react to real stimuli received from the situation they play in, and the audience also, not some dreamworld separated from the audience; both are ‘players’ who need to experience theatre not as a deviation from everyday life, a passive illusion, but as a becoming-*ingenuus* –the ability to be at the origin (*genus*), to cross the threshold between art and non-art, finding the experiential stimulus of being in reality but not of (habitual, formal) reality. Hence, ‘The question “Is this already art or is this still reality?” became inconsequential to me’ (1967, p. 86).

In *Independent Theatre: Theoretical Essays (1942–1944)* in a note titled ‘Illusion and Concrete Reality’, Kantor clarifies further:

¹⁸ See ‘People-Façades’ in *ibid.*, pp. 6–8.

¹⁹ ‘My Work-My Journey’ (1988) in Kantor 1993, pp. 258–260.

Theatre should not create the illusion of reality, which is contained in the drama. This reality of drama must become the reality on stage. The stage ‘matter’ (I call the stage matter the stage and its fascinating atmosphere, which is not yet spoiled by illusion of drama, and the “readiness” of an actor, who carries with him the potential to perform any part and all characters) must not be glossed over nor covered up with illusion. It must remain crude and raw. It must be ready to face and clash with a new reality, that of the drama. (in Kobialka 2009, p. 98).

He will later call this ‘the reality of the lowest rank.’ (1980). To find it one has to breathe differently. ‘All our sensitivity ... is directed to such states as: reluctance, unwillingness, apathy, monotony, indifference, minimalisation, ridicule, banality, ordinariness, emptiness.... These states are the states of disinterestedness. And this is what we want to achieve.’ (in Kobialka 2009, p. 147). The ‘lowest rank’ requires the metamorphosis of theatre to a state of non-acting (an event, in Kantor’s terms, rather than an inaction or idleness). It is based on the idea that the ‘pure theatricality’ of theatre, a truly autonomous theatre-becoming, is not achievable via heroic acting (which for Kantor is repulsive because it entails a naive pretence, an exulted mannerism, an irresponsible illusion of becoming-other), but through an attempt to reach a zero-state of meaning,²⁰ a zone of powerlessness. Such anti-heroic awareness lies at the root of what Kantor called ‘non-form’ art (*l’informel*) in 1961 and became one of its greatest artists.

This is not however a motive to overstate the ‘materiality of theatre’ (or the world), which in one way or another remains an oversimplification. Kantor writes in ‘The Impossible Theatre’ (1969–1973):

The development of art is not a purely formal, linear process, but most of all, within and without, it is a permanent motion and transformation of thoughts and ideas. The dogma that ideas are fully determined by historical conditions and life situations does not preclude the possibility that, at the same time, they have the autonomous power of creating and moulding new historical conditions and life situations, that is, the power of giving birth to new ideas. This, in turn, indicates that they have an autonomous and independent realm of development.²¹

A realm of autonomous but not heroic development enables a break with techniques of expression that are sanctioned to produce ‘effects’; including those bonds that assume the form of, equally heroic, revolt against established artistic tropes. The autonomous realm of art admits autonomy not in the manner of heroism, but of poverty. Artistic mimesis of nature or the world has nothing to imitate, nothing to produce or represent. Instead, art affirms its autonomy in order to ‘annex reality’, to couple itself with it.²² Rather than effect a presupposed figuration of something, reproducing or simply playing it out, it annexes reality to its awareness of poverty.

²⁰ See Kantor’s ‘Reduction of Meanings to the Zero State,’ in Kobialka 2009, p. 152.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 174ff.

²² See ‘Annexed Reality’ in Kantor 1993, pp. 71–76.

The impossible reach of reality, both known and unknown, has been conventionally reduced to a manifesto of past or future nostalgia, each time projecting an image of authority over the past or the future. But in theatrical reality the artist is ‘unauthorised, poor, limbless’, as Kantor said in his 1978 acceptance speech for The Rembrandt Prize (1993, p. 250).²³ In art one is not transported to another realm, one does not reach for a transcendental experience. One plays (the actor as an ‘*acteur-joueur*’), because in this way one can generate a coincidence with the fluid presence of the reality of the unknown.²⁴

Kantor experiments with the invocation of the unrepresentable in each presentation, yet not as some dogma of ultimate representation (some higher origin or essence).²⁵ The dogma of representation upon which modernity was mythically based renders anything possible as long as it is an image of the real that is authorised (a grossly misunderstood Platonism). This narcissistic rationalisation pushes the ‘invisible higher world’ of ‘childhood’ to the lowest rank. Yet, for Kantor, the constructive theatre that begins with the lower rank, the redundant things of everyday life, is not an exercise in nostalgia or innocence, but an experiment in a real, if awkward, existing-in-the-means-of-art and vice versa. The *reality* of art’s fiction (a play) is to be conjoined with the finitude of everyday life as its ethical condition. In modernity, theatre was theorised as the ‘place’ for the materialisation of drama, turning the theatrical experience to a becoming-aquarium. The exterior (the real world) was equally enclosed in a seductive formal autonomy far removed from playing and poetry, an automated reel of life for objects and subjects alike (in this sense also a simulation).²⁶ Yet, human beings, for Kantor, against the main tradition of Western thought (the praise of the simple, the foundation, the origin), remain organic *and* mechanical, without ‘nature’ or ‘destiny’. Their fear is born out of awareness.

Kantor writes: ‘Poetry is an extension of reality;/ its roots are in reality which is mundane,/ banal,/ grey, and despised by mediocre poets./ Despised.’²⁷ Art gains its most valid feature, not fiction and representation, but realness. Becoming indifferent, in reality but not of it, playing makes something else happen.²⁸ Representation as the kernel of modern reality (and art) is based on the idea of an act of presentation that necessitates deception and illusion.²⁹ Such reality is based on a juridical model of authenticity, where reality must pre-exist its representation or copy. Thinking in this manner is akin to the experience of standing next to a statue imagining that you could teach it to walk. Yet, as there are no returns in life, failure becomes

²³ ‘It is not true that the artist is a hero or an audacious and intrepid conqueror as a conventional legend would have it ... Believe me! he is a POOR MAN without arms and without defence who has chosen his PLACE face to face with FEAR in full awareness! It is from awareness that fear is born.’; Kantor / Kobialka 1991, p. 153.

²⁴ See Kantor’s ‘Playing’ in Kobialka 2009, 186ff.

²⁵ See ‘Silent Night (*Cricotage*)’ written in 1990, in *ibid.*, pp. 434–450.

²⁶ See Kantor’s ‘The questioning of the artistic place – The place of theatre in life’s reality’, in *ibid.*, pp. 344–345.

²⁷ See Kantor’s ‘Illusion and Repetition’, in *ibid.*, pp. 402–405.

²⁸ See Kantor’s ‘A scandalous clash between the fiction of drama and a place’, in *ibid.*, p. 345.

²⁹ See Kantor’s ‘Reflection’ from 1985, in Kobialka 2009, pp. 386–388.

a permanent state of seeking correctness and recognition, accusing life of failing to confirm an impossible authenticity.³⁰ This is not an easy lesson to endure. The *life* of art lies in the power of a contorted face that no one can escape.³¹

It was historically very successful to rely on the confidence that no one could refute (a master, a god etc.); but then it prove to be even easier to rest on a confidence that rests on other confidences, a chain of ideas, principles, institutions and representations of power that ultimately generate expectations that can only be forever postponed.³² Yet, postponing differentiation (unfolding), by entrusting a representation of difference in a 'thing', is a false paradox akin to believing that there is a place in the body one can prefer to live in.³³ Beings do not have a reality of lived being and an aesthetic reality of being or thinghood 'as such'. Following Kantor, creativity is the experience of 'going beyond the threshold of the visible', not in order to establish some higher source of reality (or the opposite to reality), but in order to *unfold* lived reality³⁴ against the 'sacrosanct conventions of the work of art'.³⁵ Kantor writes: 'The autonomous theatre I have in mind is a theatre which does not take the form of a reproducing apparatus, [...] but possesses its own independent reality'.³⁶ An affirmative gesture towards autonomy, for Kantor, does not negate or heal the 'original fracture of our species'.³⁷

In contrast to the Dadaists who put society on trial, a gesture that remained forever incomplete, Kantor put the (aesthetic) self on trial,³⁸ for splitting reality into two dimensions of alienation ('art-as-it-is-lived-by-the-artist and art-as-it-is-perceived-by-the-spectator').³⁹ If everything remains in the modality of an affirmative 'rehearsal', Kantor teaches, then we cannot suspend poetic thought to become 'subjects' of some 'fundamental' form of law of realisation as if we are exterior to it.⁴⁰ The spatiality of the real is understood not as a reservoir or a flat line of correspondence, but as governed by the laws of an unfolding without end, a continuous metamorphosis⁴¹:

³⁰ See the extensive selections of Kantor's *The Dead Class (Partytura)* compiled in *ibid.*, pp. 240–276.

³¹ See Kantor's 'From the Director's Notebook – Making faces, 1974', in *ibid.*, pp. 245–246.

³² See Michaux's 'The Statue and I', 2016, at pp. 50–1.

³³ Michaux writes in 'The Trepanned Patient', originally published in 1949 (*La Vie dans les plis*); in Darren Jackson's translation in 2016, p. 58: 'There's a place in his body where he prefers to live. It's not the same place for everyone. That's natural. But it's natural for many to like to sit inside their head. They circulate, of course, climb down, go from organ to organ, from here to there, but they often like to return to their head.'

³⁴ See Kantor's 'Inferno' in Kobialka 2009, pp. 2–6.

³⁵ My emphasis; See Kantor's 'New Theatrical Space. Where Fiction Appears' from 1980 in Kantor 1993, p. 141.

³⁶ For a discussion, see Koczy 2018.

³⁷ See Agamben 1999b, pp. 116–137; see also Kantor 1993, p. 250.

³⁸ See the key plays, *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), *Let the Artists Die* (1985) and *I Shall Never Return* (1987).

³⁹ See the similar reflection of Agamben 1999a, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Agamben 1991, p. 107: 'So when we speak we cannot do away with thought or hold our words in suspense. Thought is the suspension of the voice in language.'

⁴¹ Agamben 1993, p. 136: 'that original fracture of presence'.

SPACE itself is an OBJECT (of creation).

And the main one!

SPACE is charged with E N E R G Y.

Space shrinks and e x p a n d s.

[...]

A figure of a human being is formed at the threshold between a living, suffering organism and

a mechanism,

which functions automatically and absurdly.

It is governed by the laws of M E T A M O R P H O S I S. A figure of a human being is subject to transformations,

expansions,

transplants,

and interbreeding.⁴²

Reality's true paradox *can* only be experienced—'The impossible, the meaning of which lies ultimately in its realization' (Kantor 1967, p. 8). Adding, each time, a day to eternity, an *emballage* (packaging; Kantor's term) in continuous unfolding, not as an envoi of truth, some new God of poor things, but just like that decaying chair in the corner of the stage unfolding as it unfolds the eyes of its audience, pointing at eternity but not being of it.

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⁴² Kantor 'After the War: A Night Notebook or Metamorphoses (1947–1948)', in Kobialka 2009, pp. 108–109.

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