

1.

Let's begin with the time, the place and the key elements of the event.

It is January 21, 1967. From the Post Office on Ordynacka Street in Warsaw, a group of eight men emerges, carrying a massive letter measuring 14 meters in length, 2.5 meters in width, and of an 'appropriate thickness'¹. The group heads towards Foksal Gallery, where an assembled audience awaits the letter's arrival. Among the audience is the master of the happening, "the man in the black jacket," who receives reports from correspondents narrating the "procession" of the letter from the Main Post Office to the Gallery. He relays these reports to the gathered crowd via a megaphone.

Upon the letter's arrival, a recording of a monologue (in French) is played from a tape recorder. This monologue was sent by the 'mysterious recipient of the letter.' As it plays, the audience shares the contents of their own letters, reading aloud their fragments. The man in the black jacket continuously informs the crowd about the deteriorating health of the Mysterious Recipient of the Letter.

To finish, and as the tape recording reaches its conclusion, the event culminates in the collective destruction of the GIANT letter along with the other letters.

The entire event lasts approximately 1.5 hours.

2.

The Letter belongs to a series of happenings of experimental nature Kantor was preoccupied with in the 1960s. In December 1965, he realised at the Society of Friends of Fine Arts in Warsaw his very first happening - *Cricotage*. In January 1966, he presented *Line of Division* at the headquarters of the Association of Art Historians in Kraków. Then, on October 20, 1966, in Basel, he realized *The Great Emballage*. All three happenings were based on repetitive performing of everyday actions, with some of them clearly carrying (post?)surrealist qualities.

In the 1960s Kantor would oftentimes find himself on the edge of a division line - the one between art and life itself. And even though one could claim that Kantor's entire existence was a one grand performance, he ultimately remained within the realm of actions distinguished from reality by an artistic gesture. All of his happenings took place within the context of artistic institutions, and every element of everyday life that he incorporated into his work was transformed into artistic material through its inclusion in his creative practice.

3.

Happening as an artistic form originated from the field of experimental music. Kantor also, despite carefully constructing his own artistic teleology, first collaborated on a musical happening: the first performances of *Non Stop* by Bogusław Schaeffer (1960), carried out by Zygmunt Krauze and John Tilbury (who was in the Polish People's Republic

¹ *Metamorfozy*, p. 351.

on a scholarship). Kantor is said to have created the set design for the Kraków performance together with Tadeusz Brzozowski.

Schaeffer wrote *Non Stop* as a graphic score, allowing performances to last anywhere from 8 minutes to 6 hours. The initial performances by Krauze and Tilbury in Warsaw and Kraków in the autumn of 1964 embraced this durational character.

The Kraków performance took place in the basement of the Krzysztofory Palace (????).

4.

Monstrous, unnatural enlargement of object, which makes up a crucial visual narrative of *The Letter* - and many other works by Kantor from this period - finds its audio counterpart in the development of sound amplification. Indeed, music in Kantor's spectacles is often of 'unnatural' kind: played-back (often accelerated) marches, intended to create overwhelming masses of sound moving towards oppressive chaos... adding to this a humming down effect of used sounds. From an audiosphere perspective, Kantor's theater was always a 'noise' theater, mapping the three main meanings of the word in Polish (see Michał Libera): **hałas** (din/noise), **szum** (hum/static), and **odgłos** (sound/echo).

And, of course, there was also the supernatural Kantor-as-demiurge himself.

5.

The monstrous envelope exhibited by Kantor in Baden-Baden in 1966 made a profound impression on the French dramaturg and critic Henry Galy-Carlesie.

Under the influence of Kantor's work, Galy-Carles wrote a one-act play, *L'enveloppe*. It features four postmen and the 'Unknown' - the recipient of a letter enclosed in an envelope of a supernatural size. At first, the 'Unknown' refuses to accept the letter, but later, he is left with it in solitude.

For Galy-Carles, the oversized envelope becomes a metonym for a terrifying delivery - one whose anticipation grows in our minds to paralyzing, overwhelming proportions. It is a situation where information, much like Schrödinger's Cat, is both present and absent in our lives until we open the package.

It was the very recording of Galy-Carles' play - specifically the part of the so-called 'Unknown' performed by the author himself - that was a voice of the 'Mysterious Recipient of the Letter' played at the Foksal Gallery during the 1967 happening.

6.

A specific excerpt from the script of the 'Unknown', created for the purpose of *The Letter*, has been preserved. On a longer piece of gray paper (or perhaps a wrapping paper?), fragments of the part read by Henri Galy-Carles are juxtaposed with each other (almost in a cut-up style).

When describing *The Letter* and its prehistory, Kantor consistently makes a significant mistake - he repeatedly refers to Galy-Carles' play as *L'événement*, meaning 'the event.' This is a very interesting shifting of meanings - Kantor places the "eventual" dimension of art and performance at the center, while Galy-Carles centered on the key object itself.

7.

Monstrous enlargement of everyday objects was to become one of Kantor's crucial artistic strategies. He later enlarged to unnatural, gargantuan dimensions for example a chair. The object, as if pulled out from its original application, acquires a monstrous dimension in Kantor's work - the modern everyday (or maybe rather the everyday modernity) is overwhelming, and the art that concerns it adapts an equivalent scale.

8.

For Kantor, reading letters was like exploration of the subconscious, a kind of exercise in collective psychoanalysis. That is why Galy-Carles' play resonated with him.

This is also why expressing the unsaid through speech became such an important element of *The Letter*. The collective psychoanalytic experience was somewhat tied to the vocal expression of the group.

9.

At first glance, we observe in Kantor a movement from the object to the institution - from envelopes, packages, and wrappings to the institution of the post office. But in reality, it is more of a parallel, dual-directional movement. After all, Kantor is fascinated by people-as-bundles, wanderers packed in all their belongings, who are institutions in themselves. It is in this post-war, migrant condition that the source of Kantor's fascination with both the process of packing and sending packages lies.

Is the record a package? Are photographs, phonographic recordings, or notes packages of our memories?

10.

For the duration of the happening Foksal Gallery turned into a giant mailbox.

This is actually a fascinating thread - accurately mirroring the 'carrier's role' of Foksal, as well as other independent galleries and institutions of artistic life in the countries of Eastern Block.

Mail art - and the correspondence from artistic communities that gradually merged into art - played a huge, fundamental role in the development of the neo-avant-garde in the Eastern Bloc. (Let's mention, while focusing exclusively on Polish art institutions, the *Net* by Jarosław Kozłowski, *Biuro Poezji* by Andrzej Partum, or *Galeria Adres* by Ewa Partum.)

11.

In *The Letter*, Kantor tackled a number of contemporary auditory technologies - primarily radio broadcasting. Although the music score for the happening states: 'Along the route, reporters set up to convey information by telephone', the recordings of the 'reporters' (Zbigniew Gostomski, Edward Krasiński, Wiesław Borowski, Mariusz Tchorek) were less reminiscent of, for example, stock exchange correspondents' phones (see, for instance, Antonioni's *Night*) and more akin to the transmissions from the Peace Race route. The bicycle race was one of the largest social-sporting events in the country at the time. Radio broadcasts attracted crowds and became key events in the 1950s and 60s in the People's Republic of Poland.

However, this was not the first 'appropriation' of the element of 'radio culture' in Kantor's work - and the megaphone. The first appearance of such a device was likely in the form of a stolen wired loudspeaker (megaphone), the so-called 'barker' speaker used by the Nazi occupiers, which became part of the set for the illegal staging of *The Return of Odysseus* (1944) in a private apartment ? on Szewska Street in Kraków. The barker was suspended above a cannon barrel, a dominating element of a concretist-surrealist set design.

12.

Not much later, Kantor is going to use a megaphone to handle the audience during one of his most famous happenings, *The Panoramic Sea Happening*, which he will perform in the summer of 1967 during an outdoor event in Osieki, on the beach in nearby Łazy. The first part of the happening will be the famous *Sea Concert*, in which Edward Krasiński will conduct the sea waves - while Kantor would manage the audience's participation through the megaphone, especially during the part involving a live reconstruction of *The Raft of the Medusa* by Géricault.

13.

The application of the recording circles back to the tradition of radio experiments - above all the post-war search for the artistic language of radio, the audio-drama (Hörspiel). Experiments in this field were running across the entire Europe - radio was to become the space for new sound poetry, rooted in avant-garde poetry traditions.

This tradition was not at all foreign to Kantor. The very first, pre-war theatre Cricot, to which all undertakings of Cricot 2 referred to, already became the first place to perform a renowned *Ursonate* by Kurt Schwitters on the occasion of the premiere of 'The Cuttlefish' by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. 'The Cuttlefish' which Kantor himself would later present.

14.

Kantor remains one of the most important yet insufficiently, or incompletely, recognized pioneers of the neo-avant-garde auditory turn in visual and performative arts in Poland. To this day, no in-depth synthesis of Kantor's work has been created that would place his sound and musical experiments at the center of the discussion. Yet, these explorations

accompanied his entire theatrical output, as well as various multi-, trans-, and intermedial activities at the intersection of performative and visual arts.

In Kantor's work, we can find, for example, a 'looped,' 'gramophonic' auditory aesthetic of memory - in the repetition of selected actions in his happenings and happening theatre, or in the persistent recurrence of memories, events, and musical motifs in his *Theatre of Death*.

As a result, some elements of the set designs in Kantor's performances take on the character of sound sculptures - let us recall, for instance, the self-playing violins from *Nadobniši i koczkodany* or the so-called Trumpet of the Last Judgment from *Gdzie są niegdysiejsze śniegi* (*Where Are the Snows of Yesterday*).

15.

From the notes that Kantor compiled in preparation of *The Letter* we can also find a draft cost estimate for the happening. In it, the 'acoustic devices' are priced at 500 Polish Zloty.

16.

Every time when I myself tried to engage with the topic of sound in Kantor's oeuvre I would be facing a key, initial phenomenon - the score. The matter of scores is generally under-theorised in Kantor studies - which is also associated with scarcity in a broader theoretical reflection on theatrical scores.

Unquestionably Kantor was working on a methodology, distinct scripts, which he was then, from a perspective of time, transforming into authorial narratives - reports from the events outlining future interpretative directions and also shaping potential performance traditions. The scores of Kantor's spectacles emphasized the autonomy of the performance in relation to the original text - the scores of the happenings effectively transformed various elements (actions, events, images) drawn from reality into a form of text.

17.

Kantor's musical scores and the way we know them today were created in a manner of post-factum transcription, gathering elements of events in fragmentary sequences. Their logic is not that of, for example, musical scores, but rather that of a tape recorder - we are dealing with a single narrative sequence here, rather than, for example breaking the entire narrative into parts.

Kantor's scores are his written monologues, rarely interrupted by other voices - in the case of *The Letter*, there are surprisingly many of these voices. It's not so much the text of Galy-Carles (intentionally omitted from the happening's score, with the title of the play incorrectly recorded) - but primarily the content of the 'Reports of the Reporters.'

So in *The Letter* Kantor mobilizes the phonograph, loudspeaker, tape, telephone, and radio - a whole array of diverse auditory technologies.

18.

Autonomous Theatre, Theatre Informel, Theatre Zero - in successive reconfigurations of his post-war theatrical aesthetics, Kantor moved towards everyday life. The achievements of abstraction and the Great Avant-Garde were to be preserved, but also serve to build a new aesthetic, one closer to the times and experiences of materiality, destruction, and the reconstruction of the postwar neo-avant-garde generation.

Kantor's search was paradoxically not far from the explorations of the interwar futurist theatre (with its valorization of modern culture and its 'noisy' audiosphere). After the war, such tendencies found expression in various "concretisms" and their neodadaist derivatives - from concrete poetry and music to nouveau réalisme and pop art.

The issue of tension between 'illusion' and 'concrete reality' appears already in his theoretical texts from the period of the so-called Independent Theatre during the war.

On the auditory level it meant using the elements of stage design from *Balladyna* (1943) as a resonating speech amplifier for actors, as well as the playing of parade marches through a stolen loudspeaker - the 'barker' - in the occupied city, transformed the megaphone and the gramophone record into 'concretist,' material elements of the surrounding reality.

Itaca in *The Return of Odysseus* is a ruined land - an illusory nature of the drama was 'suspended' in the production, and elements of material culture emphasized the text's relevance and its 'real' contexts and references. Instead of illusionist realism, there was 'the inclusion of fictional reality into real life reality.'²

Due to the specificity of the stage space, the performance - like the earlier underground production of *Balladyna* by Słowacki (1943) - anticipated the later happening's blurring of the opposition between stage and audience, also creating a different auditory situation than in a classic theatrical performance.

19.

For Kantor, the post was not only an autonomous, contemporary medium - like for the creators of mail-art - but the element of the everyday, which could be engaged in the expansion of his artistic undertakings. The post office could be 'sucked-into' Kantor's world, fitting it into a wide range of meanings and references the artist applied in his work. Thus, the post was a tool that transformed objects into works of art, but also Kantor's plastic works - here he followed a path of Witkacy - into objects that challenged the status of the exceptional, autonomous artwork. Meanwhile, in the world of neo-avant-garde music, the post was a medium creating temporal relationships - an instrument for expanded musical compositions.

This concept was most fully and radically developed by Nam June Paik, who expanded the Cageian idea of silence as a social construct. Paik believed that since silence does not actually exist, every place, every situation, every object has its own audiosphere. In light of

² *Metamorfozy*, p. 66.

this - and in accordance with Cage's call for a shift in the relationship between the composer and the composition's structure - Paik saw POSTmusic as the composer's main challenge, to find tools for autonomously generating temporal structures. And here, ironically, his post-musical POSTmusic intersected with the post (Post Office), which unwittingly became an orchestra performing his composition based on sending packages according to a set structure. The tempo of the shipment – and whether or not it even reaches the recipient – enabled freedom in the execution at the composition level.

20.

In the context of the history of neo-avant-garde music, a collective tearing / ripping of a giant envelope brings to mind the use of paper in the compositions of that era. In the 1960s paper became an important layer in the neo avant-garde sound experiments, making one of the analogue sources of rustling, crackling, etc. them being a cultural counterpoint to the sounds of electronic music. The most influential composition of this movement is undoubtedly Paper Piece by Benjamin Patterson, a work of structural simplicity and genius by one of the founding fathers of Fluxus. In his piece, Patterson leaves the performers with ample room to explore various sound effects - choosing different types of paper and employing a range of sound-producing techniques (including rubbing, tearing, scraping, and POP! sounds from paper bags, etc.).

Other works of neo-avant-garde 'paper music':

Takehisa Kosugi *Micro 1* (1961)

Josef Anton Riedl - *Paper Music* (1968/1970)

Alvin Lucier - *Sound on Paper* (1985)

21.

My favorite contemporary piece that references the tradition of 'paper music' is definitely Shadowbox by Hanna Hartman (2011). The Swedish composer, with extensive experience in radio work - and an outstanding improviser - blends an ASMR-worthy amplification of delicate sounds with recurring POP! sounds from paper bags, which form the performance's sonic backdrop. A true auditory revelation.

Among contemporary compositions that explore attentive listening to the subtle sounds of paper, it is worth mentioning:

Steve Roden *Forms of Paper* (2001)

Kuba Krzewiński *Musica Publica*

Claudia Molitor *FaceTime Duo* (2020)

Howard Skempton *Open Letter* (2020)

22.

Ps. In 2015, on the occasion of the centenary of Kantor's birth, as part of the Theater Music Festival in Michałowice, I collaborated with Klaudia Rachubińska within the research-

performance activities of Grupa ETC to create a musical interpretation of *Linia Podziału*. Together, we developed a musical score derived from the structure of Kantor's theoretical text *Manifest Ambalaży*. The entire composition was based primarily on the sounds of everyday objects.

In 2020, amid pandemic restrictions, the Consortium for Artistic Practices reinterpreted *The Letter* under the auspices of the Bęc Zmiana Foundation, reconstructing Kantor's work while adhering to social distancing measures. The route ran from the contemporary headquarters of the main post office in Warsaw (Świętokrzyska Street) to the Polish Parliament building (Wiejska Street). This time, the recipient of *The Letter* was the sovereign people. On their behalf - more precisely, on behalf of the parliamentarians - the letter was received by a group of Left-wing MPs.