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Kantor as a ready-made?

Report from the final presentations of the VII edition of Maat Festival in Cracow

Anita Wach, in collaboration with the collective Via Negativa, similarly to Marta Ziótek, in her piece titled 100 Toasts for the Dead Artist, reterritorializes Kantor placing him in the very centre of the supermarket society. The founding father of Cricot 2 seems like yet another formation ready to be devoured, an immobilized matter which can be experienced through consumption. The performer proposes an ironically provocative shift, the annihilation of the artist-producer and the birth of the artist-consumer. The artist-creator is no longer exclusively being consumed but consumes himself. The deceased artist turns out to adopt the role of a parasite, appropriating the money and the homes of those still alive. The stage design resembles modern art installation. This is an extremely meticulously designed composition consisting of symmetrically arranged plastic plates with elaborate cup cakes and plastic cups filled with colorful most probably alcoholic (at least on a symbolic level) beverages. A meal served in this way may be interpreted as a post modern version of the Polish ancient tradition commemorating the dead called 'Dziady'. Nevertheless, the deceased will not be consuming the symbolic Polish sausage but will be feasting on the delicacies from fashionable designers' cafes. Interesting to note, despite Wach using quotations from Kantor's manifesto, the theatre director originally from Krakow, does not only seem to serve as the main point of reference but also as the symbolic subject figure, posthumously identified with grandeur. The creator of the Dead Class in this context features as the perfect example of a ready-made, a complete product whose task is not to refer to himself but in a way to obediently incorporate himself into the critical choreography proposed by Wach.

The performer's stage presence is not unequivocal. On the one hand, the consecutive toasts take the form of apostrophes directed to a male addressee (supposedly Kantor), on the other, Wach responds to them as if she herself was the addressee. Her identity thus liquefies, which can be easily warranted by the mind's fantasies stimulated by the colorful drinks. Hereby, a female dancer, discounted by theatre critics, envisions herself being like Tadeusz Kantor. The minimalist choreography boils down to quasi-acrobatic tricks of rearranging, displacing and pouring of the liquids from the cups. The dancer attempts to maintain her balance as she steps cautiously between narrow pathways lined with delectable desserts. Underneath her feet, an outstanding theatre of consumption unfolds. The artist directs the elements of her installation as if she was conducting a theatre ensemble. Like Kantor, she is not timid about interaction - she becomes an inherent component of the performance. Nor does she abstain from deconstructing. She destroys the gorgeous construction by treading on it (a visible reference to Kantor who managed to immobilize and even push his actors off stage). The manner in which she rules over her sweet kingdom resembles the way Jan Fabre deftly orchestrated his homely fairy-tale drug factory in his performance 'Drugs kept me alive'. The seemingly humoristic innocent aesthetics is tweaked by quite radical images within the aesthetics of body art. She rests naked on a chair, red liquid trickles down along her body, eventually to transform into an illustration of the abject. This gesture fuses the artist permanently with her art, she transcends the border between the signified and the signifier.

In one of the scenes she places empty cups over her exposed naked breasts. A clear reference to both renowned feminist performances and to Kantor's assemblages. As opposed to Kantor, Wach is much more literal in her approach. She is searching for physics in metaphysics. 100 Toasts for the Dead Artist permeates with corporeality and sensuality to an extent where it seems like the whole performance is on the one hand an attempt to demystify the myth of the artist-metaphysic and on the other an ironic commentary on the authentic idea, the total presence.

The audience, engaged by the artist throughout the piece, plays crucial part in the performance. Equipped with cards with the subsequent toasts written on them ('for all the buttons which haven't been sawn back to the coat' or 'to all the buses which have been missed'), we are forced to read them out loud. At times the musical score is so loud that one is compelled to shout the toasts at the top of his lungs. The performer skillfully drives the audience members out of their comfort zone, brilliantly tapping into Kantor's renowned belief that when one enters the theatre, consequences follow.