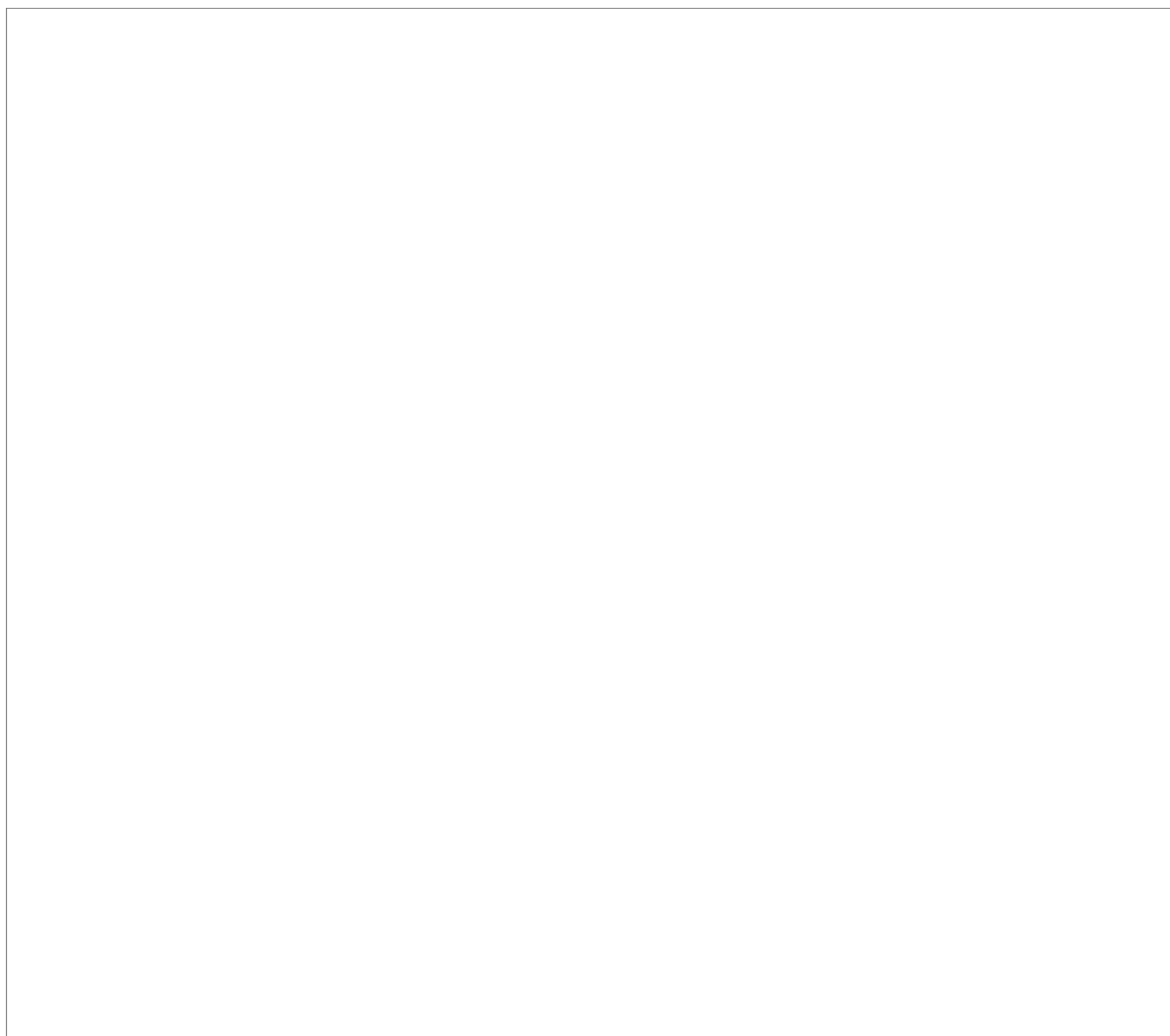


# “Children at their desk” (“The Dead Class”, 1989)



- Author Tadeusz Kantor
- Date of production 1989
- Place of creation Kraków, Poland
- Dimensions height: 144 cm, width: 132 cm, depth: 260 cm
- ID no. CRC/VII/323 /1-17
- Museum [The Cricoteka Centre for the Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor](#)
- Subjects [theatre](#), [body](#), [death](#)
- Material [wood](#), [metal](#), [plastic](#), [fabric](#), [natural hair](#), [sponge](#), [polyvinyl chloride](#)
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- Digitalisation RDW MIC, Małopolska's Virtual Museums project
- Tags [teatr](#), [Tadeusz Kantor](#), [3D](#), [szkoła](#), [audiodeskrypcja](#), [© wszystkie prawa zastrzeżone](#)

“Children at their desk” from *Umarła klasa* [*The Dead Class*] is an art work (installation) by Tadeusz Kantor created in the spring of 1989 in the Cricoteka facilities on Kanonicza Street. It is one of several examples of works by this artist, drawing upon the idea of the *Umarła klasa* [*The Dead Class*] performance (version of “A boy at his desk from *The Dead Class*”, “School Class — Closed

Work”, various kinds of drawings, sketches and paintings from the years 1975–1990) that was specially prepared for the future Museum of the Cricot 2 Theatre.

On a platform made of worn-out and decrepit boards there are four simple school desks with eleven mannequin pupils from *Umarła klasa* [*The Dead Class*]. “They are sitting (...) like in an old photograph (...); they clearly do not represent this world or this time (...)”, observes Wiesław Borowski[1]. The male pupils are wearing black linen uniforms, while the female pupils have black linen dresses and bare feet. The hands, head and feet are made of polyvinyl chloride; dimensions of the entire installation: height = 145 cm, width = 132 cm, depth = 260 cm.

Kantor called the children at their desks “bio-objects” (the pupils constituted one organism with the desks) and the “memory machine”. “At their desks one could sit, lean and stand; there was a place for all human states and emotions: suffering, fear, love, the first flickers of friendship, coercion and freedom. The desks contained a natural live human organism that constantly had the tendency to chaotically use the space to instil discipline and order. They were like a placenta (matrixes) from which something new and unexpected was born, something that, for a time, tried to go beyond the desks into this black and empty space and that always returned and moved back to them (desks) like to its home-placenta!” he wrote[2].

He also added that “life can be expressed in art only through the lack of life”. [3]

The described object was repeatedly exhibited, reproduced and displayed when Kantor was still alive, e.g., at his individual exhibition, “Plus Loin, Rien!” [“Nothing ahead”] (Galerie de France, 22 June — 1 September 1989), and a year later in Rome at the “Tadeusz Kantor. Opere dal 1956 al 1990” exhibition (Spicchi dell’Est, Galeria d’Arte, 11 June — 20 July 1990).

“School desks always stand in the CLASSROOM. But this was not a CLASSROOM—IT WAS A REAL PLACE.

This was black emptiness in front of which  
the entire audience  
stopped.

It seemed mockery that a thin string acted as a barrier.

There must have been some other, much more powerful and frightening, barrier.

In this hopeless black emptiness the school DESKS on set constituted a striking example of a BIO-OBJECT.

At the desks one could sit, lean and stand; there was a place for all human states and emotions: suffering, fear, love, the first flickers of friendship, coercion and freedom.

The desks contained a natural live human organism that constantly had the tendency to chaotically ‘use’ the space to instil discipline and order.

They were like a placenta (matrixes) from which something new and unexpected was born, something that, for a time, tried to go beyond the desks into this black and empty space and that always returned and moved back to them (desks) like to its home-placenta!” [4]

/T. Kantor/

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[1] W. Borowski, *Tadeusz Kantor*, Warsaw 1982, p. 139;

[2] T. Kantor, *Miejsce Teatralne*, [in:] T. Kantor, *Pisma*, t. 2: *Teatr Śmierci. Teksty z lat 1975-1984*, elab. K. Pleśniarowicz, Wrocław-Kraków 2004, p. 404;

[3] *There*, p. 18;

[4] *There*, p. 404.

# Figures of the theatre of death

On the bench, there are seated: a Prostitute/Night-walker, a Woman with a Mechanical Cradle, a Woman Behind the Window, an Old Man with a Bicycle, an Old Man from the Toilet, the Old Man Podofilemiak, and Paralytics. In the procession of the characters, Pedel in Past Simple (the school janitor, in this case referring to the tradition of the Galician school) also appears as does the Cleaner/Death. They take care of the “pupils”.

Figures from *Dead class* are created from memories, fragments, and remnants that are constantly falling apart.

In *Dead class*, Kantor tried to create a situation of exhibitionism, a “shameful procedure” of peeking, in which sublime matters mix with the most primitive, physiological ones.

He used wax figures of children, which became a kind of ballast for the actors who were joined with them: they represented the burden of childhood, which everyone carries within them.

Elaborated by Editorial Team of Malopolska's Virtual Museums,



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See also:

[\*Children at their desk \(The Dead Class, 1989\)\*](#)

[\*Bike/Manikin of a child on a bike \(The Dead Class, 1975\)\*](#)

[\*Mechanical cradle \(The Dead Class, 1975\)\*](#)

[\*Dummy of Bedel — image of Kazimierz Mikulski \(The Dead Class, 1975\)\*](#)

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## "The Dead Class"

*Umarta klasa (The Dead Class)*, a play produced by Kantor in 1976, was called a drama séance by him during which the figures of Witkacy and Bruno Schulz, two great fascinations of Kantor, were summoned.

The performance was kept in the convention of a nightmare, in which you go back to your school days and experience the trauma associated with this period. In response to a signal given by Kantor, who is the conductor of the entire situation, a procession of figures begins – a procession of old men carrying children on their backs who are grown into a part of their bodies. According to Kantor, they were larvae of adults in which the entire memory of the childhood age was put, abandoned and forgotten due to indifference.

*The Dead Class* had its origins in *Tumor Mózgowicz (Tumor Brainiowicz)* by Witkiewicz. Although its text in fact almost does not appear in the play, the characters of Witkiewicz present in it are dominated by Kantor's original figures.

Kantor's fascination with Bruno Schulz had its origins in the idea of degraded reality, which was realised by Kantor in his performances although he understood it slightly differently from Schulz, for whom degraded reality meant something which was “in a state of continuous fermentation, germination, and latent life. There are no inanimate, hard, and limited objects. Everything drifts beyond its borders in order to leave them at the first opportunity.” (*Cinnamon Shops*).

Kantor's degraded reality, the reality of the lowest rank, was realised in repeated, almost obsessive explorations of the theme of memory, a return to childhood and situations of the past, a return which becomes impossible. The only traces are accidental “frames of memory.”

*The Dead Class* was staged in a cramped underground room in the Krzysztofory Palace in Krakow.

Kantor also created productions in which actors performed in very tight spaces; for example, they were hung on hangers in a closet referred to by Kantor as the Interior of Imagination (*W małym dworku* [*Country House*], 1960).

A **real theatrical space** was one of Kantor's inventions in the first period of his work (1955-1975). It was not a space created with the use of illusion, in accordance with the stage directions of a drama. The audience were usually crowded into a small room, and these “uncomfortable“ conditions of reception were staging elements.

Elaborated by Anna Berestecka (Editorial team of Małopolska's Virtual Museums),



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See:

[“Children at their desk“ \(“The Dead Class”, 1989\)](#)

[“Mechanical cradle” \(“The Dead Class”, 1975\)](#)

[“Dummy of Bedel” — image of Kazimierz Mikulski \(“The Dead Class”, 1975\)](#)

[“Bike"/Manikin of a child on a bike“ \(“The Dead Class“, 1975\)](#)

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