

**History Lesson (an arrangement)**  
Scale/Mirrors/Painting/Carpet/Box

**Dorit Cypis**  
2011

**In Tribute to Tadeusz Kantor**

Tadeusz, I am so happy to be in relations with you once again. It has been quite some time since we last met, Los Angeles, the summer of 1984 I believe. The Olympic Games, against the LA backdrop pretense of urban harmony, had inhaled the city. Downtown, hundred of homeless people were given one-way bus tickets to Arizona, “cleansing” the streets of a hyper visuality of basic human life needs.

And then there was the International Theater Festival of which you were a part. Your work, a poetry of poverty, a poverty of human capacity to remember a past that confounds us, betrays us, captures us, seemed to underline the manipulative hysteria of a Los Angeles struggling to forget itself! Your work was in all shades of grey, the colors leeches out as if strained through fog. Your characters resembled the living, yet also the dead. Their movements and speech were familiar yet forever foreign to my eyes, my ears, and my sensorial body. Your silhouette, in black and white, amongst the characters’ blurred grey-ness, signified your presence as desire aiming to sharpen them into a focused meaning. Meaning though, no matter how hard you tried, seemed to be in constant slippage, all the while promising the impossible, eternal form. I loved that you were passionately unrelenting in your Sisyphus-like pursuit to still your ghosts of our collective past.

This, my memory of you, has woven itself between my musings and continues to influence how I make art of my ghosts and objects of our collective past. Thank you, Tadeusz.

*History Lesson* was written during *FabLab*, a research lab into objects, texts and images that I have collected, or that have collected me, from the past 30 years. Some are objects I created as parts of larger artworks presented publically, some are inherited from and through my parents, some I wrote as personal texts, wove as fabric, captured as snapshots, or kept as traces of experience I desired immortal connection with. All of these objects are portals that confound cultural histories while illustrating subjective experience, revealing relationships between the individual and the collective consciousness. These object and more were performed at the conclusion of *FabLab* as *The Artist and Her Archive*, December, 18, 2010, Los Angeles.



### **History Lesson (an arrangement)**

The “*Carpet*” laid out on the gallery floor belonged to my mother and father who had a love of oriental carpets in the tradition of Eastern Europe’s obsession with the Orient. They themselves were of an early Middle Eastern heritage, transplanted to Eastern Europe many centuries ago and via many cultures and ethnicities. I always imagined the carpet as a magic link between the “pre-Enlightenment” cultures of the Near East and Middle East, and the “post-Enlightenment” cultures of Europe, from oral tradition to reproduction, from dreamtime to pragmatism and the myth of progress. The absence of the former became abundance for the latter. My family’s identity as in-between was fodder for my imagination, which loves to journey in the crevices via daydream.

The “*Painting*” on the easel is by a very famous Polish painter Wojtek Kozak, 1920, depicting the deeply embedded Polish identity of battle, in this case with the Russians. Poland, home to my family for several generations, was under occupation for over 300 years, always in battle with an occupying force, always with shifting boundaries. I see now with a studied eye that the painting is bi-furcated on the diagonal, with modes of locomotion as the grand divide between the industrializing Russians riding a train up ahead, and the pre-industrialized Poles riding on horseback behind.

This was my father's favorite painting, one of many such paintings I grew up with from Tel-Aviv, Israel, to Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I was frightened of, alienated from, even embarrassed by this picture, as it did not reflect my transplanted reality. The violence both confused and confounded me. I was obsessed with why these painted men looked just like one another and yet were killing each other.

My first inclination was to defrock the "*Painting*", take it out of its gold gilded frame and allow it to be vulnerable, unframed and in question. Strangely, when I did so, the gilded plaster on the frame began to splinter and fall off in small sections. I kept each bit lest this be a bad omen, and repositioned them onto a contemporary acrylic picture frame. The parts are the parts and the whole keeps changing. The painting now seems to float, suspended as it is on an easel, to be looked at, to be in relation to other objects, other bodies, conversing silently and with a kind of equity of presence, not above, nor below, simply in relation to. The frame becomes an equal partner, separate and in proximity but no longer wedded to the painting. With its scarred surface it seems naked and vulnerable, experienced and wounded. It has done its job for years highlighting and imbuing the painting with a signification of grandeur, worth and prestige. Here, it can now rest.

Across from the painting and on the carpet still, I have placed a "*Grove of Mirrors*", bathroom vanity mirrors with one side a 5x magnification for closer looks. There are 7 of them with round mirror heads bobbing on flexible electrical conduit bodies that are held together with a piece of fabric wrapped around their middles, resting their small pedestal feet on the carpet. They are very like a chorus of singers singing, a summer bouquet of sunflowers glowing, a gaggle of faces reflecting and refracting in all directions. They simply must be here in the conversation with the painting, the carpet, the scale, and the storage box. Trust me, they must be here.

The "*History Scale*" is like a shiny cold-blooded serpent waiting patiently for a body to be weighed. It's metal skin, like fish scales out of water now drying in the light of the overhead gallery lights, still seems moist as if it had been in a recent encounter with a liquid. At its base there are inscribed letters in a script type, like a tattoo, spelling the word "*History*", as if we didn't know. How can we not know that a body's weight is the weight of an experienced history, a life with measured paths through highs and lows, interiors and exteriors, very, very private and oh so public.

So, now when a body steps onto this scale, its weight triggers a small video camera embedded above the number dial, and records the image of this body from its feet upwards towards the head, from the bottom up. Unknown to this body, its image is projected onto a screen placed away and behind the scale to be seen by other bodies moving through the space. Others can view the bottom-up body, but when this body turns to see itself, it glimpses its distorted body without a head. The head now turned backwards, you see, is out of range of the camera that is in front of the body. One can never recognize oneself in the image taken by history, but others will forever accept this image/trace as the person him/herself. Such is the story of history.

And why the “*Storage Box*”? It is a box that has been used to safely store the “*History Scale*” since the year 2000, and will be used again after *FabLab* is long gone. History, with a scale as its judge, is always being stored, protected from the present and separated from any future light. Here though, now it benefits us that the *History Scale Storage Box* hangs suspended, hovering above the ground like a magic carpet, seeming to straddle time and space, somewhere in-between, perhaps like my family transplanted so many times, or like the suspended painted battle pointing to the reader’s position of weighing meaning, deciphering narrative, trying on bits of story like second hand clothing recycled in a thrift shop, reflected this way and that, somewhere between dream-time and pragmatism. This box is us.

published in:

**Tadeusz Kantor: Twenty Years later**

***Polish Theatre Polish Perspectives***

Cricoteka, Krakow, Poland, 2011