

Life and Death Matters

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Where should I begin? It's been a difficult stretch in the weeks leading up to completing *PAJ 114*. Suicide bombings, the Orlando massacre, refugees floating in the sea, Brexit, police shootings, and the death of my beloved mother. As I look over the contributions to this issue, I have before me reflections on the incandescent achievement of Tadeusz Kantor, who wrought his great work from the shards of World War II and communism; an essay that finds avant-garde spiritual vanguardism in the act of a Buddhist monk who, in 1963, startled the world with his self-immolation in protest of the Vietnam war; Aleister Crowley's fierce anti-fundamentalist play, written against the background of World War I; and, closer to our own time, notes on the use of Greek plays in their healing effects on veterans of Middle East wars complete the historical touchstones.

If I have emphasized the more overtly political contents of the issue, that is by no means to neglect the several valuable commentaries on dance, theatre, and media. Life goes on. In the midst of momentous local and global events, social transformation, and emotional turmoil there is always the work of art. Artists struggle with materials, solve internal conflicts, imagine new worlds. We still acknowledge the importance of human expression and creative spirit in the face of war, hatred, fear, grief, pendulum swings of ideologies. Imagination plows through catastrophe.

Two issues ago, in *PAJ 112*, I wrote about the inner life of art as a force beyond the excess of lamentation that pervades the culture:

Artistic experiences that break through the known world bear gifts of intellectual prowess and wonder and disturbance, reconfiguring the natural order of sight and speech. They have a reality all their own.

These days I'm preoccupied with contemplating how each work of art has a breath, a way of breathing generated by the artist that we experience in and

through its rhythm. It is of this world and yet beyond it, in the generosity of its regard becoming part of the history of our experience. I've been thinking a great deal about breath lately because I spent several days in the stillness of a hospice watching my mother breathe after her heart attack. Then one day she stopped breathing. Yet, the trace of the human heart, the heart of a person, the heart of a work, always remains within us.

I stopped writing this text for a few hours and took a break with Alberto Manguel's luminous *History of Reading*. After some pages, an image from a recent Facebook feed showing someone reading *Fefu and Her Friends* to Maria Irene Fornes at her assisted living facility came to mind. That led to my recollection of something Fornes said when I interviewed her in the late seventies for her production of the play at the American Place Theatre. Referring to *Fefu*, Fornes observed, "it is the play that breathes, not the characters." The sense of a work breathing allows that every work we encounter becomes part of every other work and part of us. They all exist outside the realm of the real world and yet belong to it. This is the melody of civilization.

What I want to celebrate is the breath of the work of art, the beating heart of its futurity.