

## **TADEUSZ KANTOR AS 'HUNGER ARTIST' IN THE 'POOR ROOM OF THE IMAGINATION'**

### **Abstract**

In a story by Franz Kafka, a caged man endures hunger as a public spectacle, an act of self-starvation antithetical to life. The attraction lies in taking life to the precipice of extinction. In witnessing the diminishing of vitality to its vanishing point the value of life itself is somehow affirmed for the spectator.

Echoes of Kafka can be found in the late art of Tadeusz Kantor whose aesthetic of 'poor reality' underwent a radical transformation. As the ageing artist approached death he began to use himself as his own 'found object'. Where Kafka martyred himself in his writing, Kantor became a version of Kafka's 'Hunger Artist' and put the condition of his encroaching death on display. In his painting he returned to figuration in a series of self-portraits, and his presence in his theatre changed from that of demiurge-creator to participant-victim.

This essay uses the metaphysics of Heidegger and Agamben to examine this turn in Kantor's aesthetic in his series of late paintings and theatrical works between 1985 and his death in 1990.

Common to this late work is the motif of the 'poor room of the imagination', a metaphysical space in which the artist rehearses both a yearning for life and his departure from it. In using his art to confront his own condition Kantor can be seen to affirm the value of life even as it approaches the condition of extinction. In this sense Kantor eschews the negative endings of Kafka's fictional heroes.

(250 words)

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## TADEUSZ KANTOR AS 'HUNGER ARTIST' IN THE 'POOR ROOM OF THE IMAGINATION'

### Introduction: Thrown into the *stanza* of being

The following discussion focuses on the major works of Tadeusz Kantor's last decade, principally the works: *Niech szczeną artiści* (Let the Artists Die, 1985), *Nigdy tu już nie powrócę* (I Shall Never Return, 1988) and *Dziś są moje urodziny* (Today is My Birthday, 1991), together with his last cycle of paintings, *Dalej już nic ...* (Further on nothing ... , 1987–89). With his development of the idea of 'the poor little room of the imagination' from the schoolroom of *The Dead Class* to the family room of *Wielopole, Wielopole*, Kantor opened up the way to include himself more and more tangibly within his work. In doing so it is possible to draw a parallel between Kantor's late work and that of Franz Kafka, especially Kafka's late story 'A Fasting Showman' in the way that each used their work to deal with their own impending deaths. At stake in the metaphysics of mortality informing each artists' work are issues concerning truth and freedom, which I shall discuss with reference to Heidegger and the early twentieth-century Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). These, I shall show, add another dimension to understanding why Kantor called the theatre stage his 'Poor Little Room of the Imagination'. With *The Dead Class* and *Wielopole, Wielopole*, and in his writings such as *Theatrical Place*, Kantor began to articulate his engagement with the problem of human being in terms of his idea of memory. The site of this engagement with memory became more and more clearly a room: at first a schoolroom in 1975 and then a family room in 1980. In later productions the identity of this room would shift its form and become a dying room, a prison cell and torture chamber in *Let the Artists Die* (1985), a disreputable inn of memory in *I Shall Never Return* (1988) and the artist's own studio in *Today is My Birthday* (1991). Rooms also featured in Kantor's late paintings and in the two cricotages that he created with students around the time he was working on his last two large-scale productions. In *Bardzo krótka lekcja* (A Very Short Lesson), performed at the Institut International de la Marionette

at Charleville-Mézières in 1988, material associated with *I Shall Never Return*, is set in a room inspired by a sketch for Kantor's 1989 painting *Mój dom* (My House), which depicts a smoking, ramshackled chimney stack, rising from bare floorboards in an otherwise empty room.<sup>1</sup> Kantor never suffered the physical destruction of any of his homes. This 'house' is an idea of 'home' that seems to owe more to Heidegger's idea of the nature of the problematic dwelling of *Dasein* and its 'thrownness' into the world than to any physical dwelling. The image of this chimney was fully realised in the scenography of Kantor's last cricotage, *Cicha noc* (Silent Night) performed in Avignon in 1990 which was created during the period of rehearsals for *Today is My Birthday*. For Kantor, the 'Poor Object' had gradually come to include the idea of memory itself as an 'object', and in these last works the ideas coalesced into the conceit of the 'Poor Little Room of the Imagination':

—an open interior of our imagination—  
which exists in a different dimension.  
This is where the threats of our memory  
are woven;  
where our freedom is born....  
We are standing at the door giving a long  
farewell to our childhood;  
we are standing helpless  
at the threshold of eternity and death.  
In front of us,  
in this poor and dusky room,  
behind the doors,  
a storm and an inferno rage,  
and the waters of the flood rise.  
The weak walls of our ROOM;  
of our everyday or  
linear time  
will not save us....  
Important events stand behind the doors  
it is enough to open them....  
(Kantor 2009: 366. Ellipses in original).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Anna Halczak, the painting depicts the only element of the house that had not been destroyed (Halczak 2005a).

This 'room' is a space replete with potential in which Kantor can 'remember' a pre-First-World-War Galician schoolroom that can metamorphose into a Jewish *cheder*; where he can 'remember' a wedding between his parents that occurred before his birth, and where Austro-Hungarian recruits colonise the corner of his childhood family room; where he can 'remember' his own death occurring in the same family room where his six-year-old self played with his lead soldiers; where characters from his own past productions come back to remonstrate with him and where his father who left before he was born is 'remembered' as a grotesque tableau of his execution in Auschwitz; where an image of Jehovah tending to his creation mingles with that of a field hospital for the war-wounded, where late friends from his artistic circle in Kraków share his studio with a dead hero from the era of Constructivism and where the celebration of his own birthday shares the same studio space with that of his father's birthday celebrations depicted in a family photograph taken before he was born. The idea that the life of memory in the faculty of imagination, both individually and collectively, is the only reality—the truly real—is one that finds resonance in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, who, in one of his late poems stages his 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour' 'in a room / In which we rest and, for small reason, think / The world imagined is the ultimate good' (Stevens 1997: 444). The imaginative act, central to the act of *poiesis*, the production into being which is what, for Stevens, seems to be the essence of poetry, is related to Heidegger's idea that 'Language is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell' (Heidegger 1998a: 239). Agamben develops this relationship in his 1996 essay "'Corn": From Anatomy to Poetics' (in Agamben 1999b), where he cites Dante Alighieri's definition of the elements of poetic form in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, II, IX, 2–3:

And here you must know that this word [*stanza*] was coined solely for the purpose of discussing poetic technique, so that the object in which the whole art of the *canzone* [song] was enshrined should be called a stanza, that is, a capacious storehouse or receptacle for the art in its entirety. *For just as the canzone is the lap*

*of its subject-matter, so the stanza enlaps  
its whole technique [...].*

(Dante Alighieri 1996: 72–73. Cited in  
Agamben 1999: 35. His emphasis)

*Stanza* is of course the Italian word for ‘room’. Agamben uses this thirteenth-century idea of *stanza*<sup>2</sup>—‘a capacious storehouse or receptacle’—as a metaphor for Being, for Heidegger’s ‘house of being’. For Dante the stanza was a container for the poet’s art, a ‘room’ in which the poem’s meanings were contained and in which they dwelt. In this sense they were like the Heraclitean ideas of *ēthos* and *moira*: the span of human life viewed as the ‘allotted portion’ or container for the individual’s existence (see Kahn 1979: 231–232). Viewed in this way it is possible to see how Kantor’s rooms, and his idea of the room, is able to operate for him as a stage for human being. ‘The Poor Little Room of the Imagination’ facilitates a space for the free play of memory, sometimes personal and sometimes collective (in the sense used by Maurice Halbwachs 1980 and 1992). In the final decade of his life Kantor played with this idea almost obsessively.

### **Human and Animal Being and their Relation to Finitude**

In his 1929 lectures on the fundamental concepts of metaphysics Heidegger, citing a fragment of Novalis, characterised the human condition as a state of homesickness (1995: 5). For Heidegger, human being, ‘thrown’ into the world, found itself out of attunement. Heidegger’s solution to this state of restlessness was to formulate a conception of human being, or *Dasein*, that was based on an attempt to establish a fundamental difference between animal and human nature. In order to do this he made use of radical contemporary scientific theories of the nature of living things in order to establish a particular understanding of the hierarchical ranking of human and animal life.

In his late short story, ‘A Fasting Showman’ (1922)—part of a suite of four short stories written and prepared for

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<sup>2</sup> Agamben had highlighted this definition at the beginning of his second book published in 1977: *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (1993).

publication shortly before his death by consumption in 1924 and published together under the title 'A Hunger Artist'—Kafka portrays his protagonist as a dying, caged human being, who is placed in direct competition with the animal menagerie of the circus in which he is exhibited. The hunger artist is compared unfavourably with the other animal attractions and is eventually thrown out and replaced by a vibrant young panther. Kafka was influenced by Rilke's poetry, and Heidegger, in a later series of lectures delivered at the University of Freiburg in 1942–43 on the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides, also makes reference to Rilke in his discussion of the poet's eighth *Duino Elegy*, a poem written in the same year as 'A Fasting Showman'.<sup>3</sup> The eighth *Duino Elegy* deals with the concept of the 'open', which Rilke uses to make an unfavourable comparison between humans and animal nature in general. For Rilke, the 'natural' state of the animal lends it a more 'open' nature, whereas human being is turned back upon itself, closing itself up to possibilities. In its eulogisation of animal nature this poem prefigures the vital freedom suggested by Kafka's panther in contrast with the discarded hunger artist. Heidegger however, in his discussion of this poem, reverses Rilke's hierarchical ranking by arguing that it is humans that truly see the open rather than animals.<sup>4</sup>

Both Rilke's and Heidegger's contrasting visions of the relative ranking of human and animal nature hinge on a metaphysical preoccupation with death. For Rilke, 'nearing death, one doesn't see death; but stares beyond, perhaps with an animal's vast gaze' (1987: 193). For Heidegger, the essential radical nature of human being was *finitude*, or being-for-death—the essential transitoriness of human existence. The implication of Heidegger's perspective is that Rilke's animal's 'vast gaze' is simply innocent ignorance; only the sentience of human being

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<sup>3</sup> The inspiration for Kafka's panther is thought to have been Rainer Maria Rilke's 1903 poem 'The Panther in the Paris Zoo' (Rilke 1987: 25). However, Rilke's panther is rather a sad animal in comparison to Kafka's. Heidegger makes no reference to this poem and it is rather the account of the vibrancy of animal nature in the eighth *Duino Elegy* that provides the matter for his discussion.

<sup>4</sup> For a stimulating recent discussion of Heidegger, Rilke and the concept of 'open' see: Agamben 2004.

truly has the potential to transcend its situation by recognising the imminence of death as an essential defining feature of its being.

Franz Kafka was also much preoccupied with death, which often occurs in his writing with reference to animal nature (as with, for example, Jozef K., who, on the final page of *The Trial*, dies 'like a dog'—'as if the shame of it would outlive him' (Kafka 1977: 254). As Joachim Beug has pointed out in his 1980 essay 'The Cunning of a Writer' Kafka's writing of death scenes 'was inseparably entangled with the anticipation of his own death' (1980: 131). In his diaries and letters Kafka often referred to the anticipation of his own end: 'Sometimes a naïve person will wish, "I would like to die and see how everyone mourns me"—this is the scene such a writer is continually staging' (Kafka cited in: Beug 1980: 132). Indeed, Kafka's tale about the hunger artist was intimately connected with his own death. Kafka had completed his tale, which was clearly a reflection of his own worsening tuberculosis, in 1922. It was one of the few tales that he permitted his friend Max Brod to have published and he died in bed in 1924 whilst correcting the proofs (see Gilman 2005: 116 and 129).

Kantor too was an artist much preoccupied with death and, like Kafka, he was also involved in his artistic work right up to his end. Kantor was in the middle of making the final adjustments and preparations to what was to be his last theatre spectacle, *Today is My Birthday*, when he died on December the eighth 1990. In their artistic attempts to deal with the existential anxiety of the human condition, both Kafka and Kantor made a home for themselves in their work. Moreover, in both his theatre and, in the paintings made during the last years of his life, Kantor was continually staging his own death. However, Kantor went even further than Kafka in actually putting himself on public display in the repeated pictorial and theatrical depictions of his soon-to-be-expiring self. The self that Kantor is exhibiting is one that is approaching death and with this passage towards non-existence and the apparent growing awareness of the poor fragile nature of the human individual Kantor might be likened to Rilke's animal who 'stares beyond' death. However, in his increasing willingness to confront his own impending mortality, Kantor can rather be seen as a 'poor' version of Heidegger's conception of fully-realised human

*Dasein* wrestling with the difficult reality of the finitude of human existence.

The following discussion uses the problematic juxtaposition between the hunger artist and the panther in Kafka's tale, together with a consideration of Heidegger's analyses of human and animal worlds and of the questions raised, as a key to understanding this final turn towards the confrontation of Kantor's own impending mortality in his late work.

In the preparations *Today is My Birthday* (1991), Kantor intended to exhibit himself on stage.<sup>5</sup> He declared:

I have decided to move in and live on  
stage—  
I have here my bed, my table, my chair,  
and,  
of course, my paintings.  
I have often imagined my room in a  
theatre,  
inside of the theatre,  
on stage, rather than in a hotel.  
So, my—as I call it—Poor Little Room of  
Imagination  
is placed on stage.

(Kantor in Di Mambro 1991: 6; Kantor  
2005: 232)

In 1968 Kantor had previously anatomised an anonymous stranger's clothing and pockets in his *Anatomy Lesson According to Rembrandt* in order to identify 'the genuine, / authentic side of / individuality, / the forgotten leftovers, / the shameful litter, / these wrinkled and crushed / p o c k e t s ! / ridiculous organs of / human / instincts / given for preservation / and memory!' (Kantor 1976: 26, my translation). In his final production he seemed to want to anatomise his own 'authentic individuality'.

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<sup>5</sup> 'I am not the author. / No! I am something / more, / I am / in the very centre / of that which is going on / on stage' (Kantor in Kraszewski 1994: 398).

The setting Kantor conceived for himself was in the form of his own artist's studio, with a table and chair, washbasin, stove and a bed. Three large picture frames defined the space of the room. The picture frame to the left contained the author's living self-portrait, played by Andrzej Welmiński, seated with characteristic hat, scarf and coat. In the frame to the right was a figure in black lace depicting one of Kantor's paintings based on the figure of the Infanta Margarita de Austria from Velázquez' painting of 1656 *Las Meninas*. In between and to the rear and facing the audience stood the large, central frame that would depict a re-enactment of a family photograph of Kantor's father's birthday celebration. From a central door in the darkness behind this large frame and from the other gloomy corners of this 'Poor Room' would enter various dead relatives and friends and the 'massed forces of history' that assaulted the artist in his refuge. Two figures, the author's 'shadow' and a cleaning lady, supervised the 'Poor Room' and attempted to restore order following each incursion from the outside.

Kantor's on-stage studio was not just a 'room' but also, as he said, a 'Poor Room of the Imagination'. As such it was a metaphysical room, a metaphorical space situated on the border between two realities: conventional reality represented by the audience on one side, and the reality of the eternal world of fiction, art and memory on the other, installed by the portals formed by the three picture frames that defined the stage area. Kantor described this 'Poor Room' as 'a dark hole into which fall various objects from the outside' (Kantor cited in Pleśniarowicz 2004: 277). It is therefore clearly a vision of the imagination or the human mind: the world of individual subjective consciousness into which the objective world 'falls'. However, Kantor's metaphorical room would also seem to be a 'poor' version of the active, projecting mind championed in nineteenth-century Romantic metaphors. In Romantic philosophy the mind was a Neoplatonic 'candle of the Lord', that, unlike the passive mirror or *tabula rasa* of the English Enlightenment philosopher John Locke, was an active partner in creating the world as opposed to a passive agent: a lamp rather than a mirror (see: Abrams 1979: 57–69). Of course, Kantor's Romantic heritage was of a specifically Polish character. It is therefore not surprising that a sense of cruel fatalism informs his model of the mind. In the 'Poor Little Room of the Imagination' Kantor, his

memories and art, shelter from the outer world, represented by war and the figures and agents of authority. Kantor envisaged this 'Poor Little Room' as the ultimate refuge or dwelling of the fragile individual human being. Kantor died on December the eighth before the final dress rehearsal of *Today is My Birthday*. The production that premiered in Toulouse on January 10, 1991 and that subsequently completed its tour of major European cities and New York, did so without its creator, in the almost-finished state that Kantor left it in.<sup>6</sup>

Kantor had already exhibited theatrical versions of his own death in his preceding two major spectacles in response to the growing sense of his own impending mortality. In *Let the Artists Die* identical twin actors repeatedly enact an imagined bedridden consumptive death, with one of the twins taking the part of the artist's dying body and the other acting as a witness to the event. In *I Shall Never Return* the setting was a 'Poor Inn of Memory' to which Kantor returned, carrying a coffin as a blatant symbol of his own death.

### **On the Threshold**

It was not only in his theatrical work that Kantor began to place himself on public display. Between 1985 and 1988 Kantor produced an extraordinary series of paintings which were exhibited in Kraków in 1988 under the title *Further on, Nothing ...*. These paintings were a shock to many of Kantor's critics as they marked a turn away from the particular avant-garde strategies of his previous paintings which had been preoccupied with the abstraction of *informel*, the aesthetics of *emballage* and the happening. These new paintings marked a

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<sup>6</sup> In the performance of *Today is My Birthday* that actually played after Kantor's death, the dead artist's absence was made present by an oil lamp placed on the on-stage table where he was to have been seated during the performance. In the opening sequence this lamp was lit for the duration of the performance by Andrzej Welmiński, the actor who played the part of Kantor's self-portrait. At certain points during the performance Welmiński would protectively pick up the oil lamp to shelter it from the hostile forces that periodically invaded the room.

return to figuration<sup>7</sup> and in many of them the figure depicted (as indeed Andrzej Żurowski complained about the artist's onstage presence in his 1985 essay)<sup>8</sup> was Kantor himself. In the paintings dating mostly from 1987, Kantor depicted himself in a number of narrative situations that employed playful paradoxes embodied in their titles: *Mam dość siedzenia w obrazie*. *Wychodzę* (I've had enough of sitting in this painting. I'm leaving, 1987); *Trzymam obraz, na którym jestem namalowany jak trzymam obraz* (I am holding a picture in which I am shown holding a picture, 1987); and *Ścieram obraz, na którym jestem namalowany jak ścieram obraz* (I am wiping off the picture in which I am shown wiping off a picture, 1987).<sup>9</sup> In these works the paradox is achieved by the addition of sculptural objects which extend the figure beyond the confines of the canvas into the 'real world'. Artificial legs and arms continue the painted limbs into real space in such a way that the painterly representation of Kantor seems to achieve the impossible: of stepping out of the painting, of holding his own painting of himself up, or of wiping off the paint from the very canvas that portrays him.

Although these paintings are in one sense clearly a return to figuration, the representational instability that the playful conceits and additions lend to these canvases make them every bit a continuation of Kantor's critique of representation as any of Kantor's work. In a sense these paintings perform their own self-criticism. Just as Malevich's *Black Square* is not a representation of a black square, but a black square in its own right; similarly Kantor's self-portraits clearly signal what they are by going so far in the attempt to create an illusion that they render themselves as three-dimensional objects in their own

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<sup>7</sup> Along with many of his colleagues who had experienced the reality of Nazi occupation, Kantor had made a conscious turn away from figurative painting after the war in response to the vivid memories of wartime cruelty. These late paintings marked a return to figuration after a period of some forty years. For an account of the paintings in this exhibition see Borowski (1989) and Gołubiew (2000).

<sup>8</sup> See Żurowski 1985.

<sup>9</sup> See Kantor 1991a: plates 263, 262 and 268; The Polish titles and dates are taken from Gołubiew 2000: 13, 14 and 17.

right. Whereas in naturalistic paintings and films, the aim is for the viewer to forget the medium by being engrossed in the illusory reality of the represented world, in Kantor's late paintings this is not possible. Even the titles draw attention to their status as real objects in the real world at the same time as alluding to the ridiculous and impossible actions they purport to perform.

The apparent playfulness of the 1987 paintings belies a certain darker restlessness, for the paintings from 1988 eschew sculptural extensions and rely purely on painterly means to achieve a more sombre affect. In the self-portraits in this later sequence, Kantor's self-portrayal has more the sense of himself as a victim, or prisoner. Whereas in the sculptural paintings the figure seemed to emanate a vital energy, in these later paintings there is the sense of frailty, infirmity and death. In *Mam wam coś do powiedzenia* (I have something to tell you, 1988) an emaciated, naked figure of an aged Kantor stares forlornly out of a black background directly at the observer. In *Pewnego dnia żołdak napoleoński z obrazu Goi wtargnął do mego pokoju* (One day Napoleon's soldier from Goya's painting invaded my room, 1988) the figure of Kantor, dressed in Bohemian coat, hat and scarf, after the manner of Craig, stands in frail defiance as one of the soldiers from Goya's 1814 painting, *The Executions of the Defenders of Madrid*, takes aim at him. In another series of paintings from the same year, titled *Cholernie spadam!/I am falling down like hell!* 1988) the naked and emaciated figure of the artist appears to float over featureless landscapes in which the church from his home village of Wielopole sits in the distance. Finally, and in stark contrast to the sculptural escape from the earlier work *I've had enough of sitting in this picture ...*, a painting depicting Kantor on his deathbed illuminated by a single candle against a black background, is titled: *W tym obrazie muszę pozostać [Z tego obrazu już nie wyjdę]* (In this picture I must stay [From this picture I cannot leave], 1988).<sup>10</sup> This prefigures Kantor's decision to 'move in and live on stage' in *Today is My Birthday*. This only serves to highlight the sense of continuum between

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<sup>10</sup> See Kantor 1991a: plates 261 (titled here, *Autportrait*), 265 and 269 (The *Cholernie spadam!* series is not reproduced in this album); The Polish titles and dates are taken from Gołubiew 2000: 11, 19, 23–26 and 20.

painting and performance in Kantor's work: his theatre spectacles are moving paintings; his playful paintings imply performance.

As I have already indicated, this increasing preoccupation with the presentation of his soon-to-be-expiring self in his late work suggests parallels between Kantor and the protagonist in Kafka's tale about the hunger artist. The fasting showmen of the late nineteenth century, upon which Kafka's figure is apparently based, starved themselves for around forty days and then celebrated the end of this successful feat of endurance with a large feast. On December the twenty first 1890, Giovanni Succi broke a forty-five-day fast in New York. As the *Daily Tribune* reported: 'Succi arose from his couch and then it seemed as if the persons looking at him were welcoming him back from the grave a long-lost brother' (cited in Russell 2006: 4). By staging an approach to death by self-starvation and then turning back from the brink, the performance of the hunger artist could be seen as life-affirming: death has been denied and the appetite for life re-embraced. The hunger artist's self-sacrifice becomes a rebirth and therefore a cause for celebration. Kafka's hunger artist, however, desires to go beyond the normal pattern for his fasts and break his previous record. He wants to excel at his 'art'. But, as Kafka's story finally reveals, the artist was simply a fussy eater who couldn't find anything he liked to eat (Kafka 1978: 173–174). For Kafka, the hunger artist, together with the other protagonists in the collection he was correcting for the publisher at the time of his death, stands as a symbol of the existential nature of the artist's troubled relation to society. Kafka's artist *wants* to do a good job, but, because he starves himself out of a *lack* of appetite, he knows that he is, in a sense, a fraud. The very reason for his success, the fact that fasting is so easy for him, means that it isn't really much of an achievement and contributes to his sense of failure: the very reason that he should not be admired. Because of this, Kafka's protagonists appear to be not so life-affirming, but rather to exemplify Nietzsche's view of a 'sick' and problematic humanity: a sick species in existential crisis. As Nietzsche comments in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: 'man is more sick, more uncertain, more mutable, less defined than any other animal, there is no doubt about that—he is *the* sick animal ...' (Nietzsche 1996: 100).

One of the most telling aspects of Kafka's story is that the hunger artist, placed in direct competition with the circus's animal menagerie, loses the public's interest and is eventually thrown out and replaced by 'a young panther'. (In typically Kafkaesque fashion, the hunger artist, 'in order to spare his own feelings ... avoided reading the conditions of his contract' (Kafka 1978: 170).) This beast captures the public's attention completely and seems to be presented by the Jewish, consumptive Kafka as the complete antithesis of the weak and starving artist: the new animal is like a Blakean Tyger, 'burning bright' with vital energy and a healthy appetite. As Kafka puts it, the panther's:

noble body, furnished almost to bursting point with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it [...] the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it. But they braced themselves, crowded round the cage and did not want ever to move away.

(Kafka 1978: 174)

The public in Kafka's story, uninterested in his version of the hunger artist, find themselves captivated by the apparent life-affirming spectacle of the panther.

Perhaps panthers are to be preferred? But if they are more desirable why is the 'noble body' of the panther taken as such an attractive and powerful antidote to the emaciated and sickly, but still human form of the hunger artist? This apparent inversion in the usual relation in rank between humans and animals in the final paragraph of Kafka's tale relates to the similar reversal in Rilke's eighth *Duino Elegy*. In Rilke's poem 'With all its eyes the natural world looks out / into the Open. Only *our* eyes are turned / backward ... like traps ...' (1987: 193). For animals, according to Rilke's poem, 'everything is womb' (Ibid.: 195) for, like Kafka's panther, they carry their world around with them: they are 'at home in the world' in contrast to Heidegger's conception of humanity as existing in a state of 'homesickness'. As Heidegger discusses in his lectures on Parmenides:

According to Rilke the animal sees more than man does, for the animal's gaze is not trammelled by any objects but can go on infinitely, in some unknown way, into the objectless. The animal has before itself the limitless. It never encounters a limit on its path, hence not even death. The animal is 'free from death' as it goes on into the limitless; its advance is never doubled back, as is the case with human representing, and it never sees what is behind itself.

(Heidegger 1998b: 157–8)

Heidegger's account of Rilke's view of the animals' 'openness' carries connotations of Craig's description of the 'carved eyes' in the figures in Ancient Egyptian art that carry a strong sense of death that 'will deny you until the crack of doom' an 'attitude so silent that it is death-like' (Craig 1958: 87). This 'gaze' also seems reminiscent of the implacable gaze of the eyes of icons, which famously appear to follow their observers around the room.

Concerning humanity Rilke asks: 'Who has twisted us round like this, so that / no matter what we do, we are in the posture of someone going away?' (1987: 197). From a Nietzschean perspective Kafka's figure of the panther is perceived by the public as refreshingly free from the 'sickness' of the hunger artist who stands, instead, as an unwelcome reminder of their own 'sick' humanity with his unhealthy 'game with death'. The panther embodies a pure 'will to life' and, as Heidegger points out, knows nothing of death. It is this that so captivates the public. The hunger artist, however, is caught in his game between desire for public recognition and the desire to justify his 'art', which he practices, after all, out of habitual compulsion rather than conscious choice. In this he is caught in the dilemma of the artist analysed by Agamben in *The Man Without Content* (1999), in conflict between creative desire and the aesthetic 'taste' of the spectator. He, therefore, embodies the messy reality of human existence characterised by this split, caught up in its own self-regard and petty contingent worries

and concerns which contrasts with the panther's apparent purity of being.

For Heidegger, Rilke's version of the hierarchical relationship between animal and human being was an illusion: the apparent freedom carried around by the animal is rather a consequence of the limited nature of its existence. According to Heidegger it is humanity who have the true potential for freedom. The essence of human being, for Heidegger, lies exactly in the finitude of its existence, and the 'sickness' of humanity lies not in any morbid preoccupation with death but rather in its failure to accept and dwell within this essential being-for-death. For Heidegger it is, paradoxically, death that defines us<sup>11</sup> and only humanity has the capacity for the recognition that opens the individual up to the true nature of being. This recognition of the mortal context of existence is, for Heidegger, denied to animal nature. For Rilke, it is only the animal that sees the open, whereas, for Heidegger, it is only human being that has this capacity.

In his lectures on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1995) Heidegger outlined a ranking of the categories of the inanimate, the animal and the human, and sets forth the thesis that the stone is *worldless*, the animal is *poor in world*, and the human being is *world-forming* (1995: 177). In this discussion Heidegger refers extensively to the theories of the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll, focussing on his concept of *Umwelt* or the environment of the living

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<sup>11</sup> 'Finitude is not some property that is merely attached to us, but is *our fundamental way of being*' (Heidegger 1995: 6).

creature as subjectively perceived.<sup>12</sup> For Uexküll, each animal exists in a world which it knows only through a limited number of 'carriers of significance' which act as 'disinhibitors' or triggers for certain aspects of the creature's repertoire of behaviour. Heidegger takes this idea and uses it to sketch out a sense of the difference between animal and human being. As Heidegger puts it 'Plant and animal are suspended in something outside of themselves without ever being able to 'see' either the outside or the inside' (1998: 160). In his famous description of the *Umwelt* of the tick, Uexküll had sought to demonstrate that the animal knows nothing of the world it moves and acts in other than the specific 'carriers of significance' in its environment. As such, according to Heidegger, the animal lives in a circle of captivation, bound within the horizon of the specific stimuli with which it is adapted to interface. The more complex the animal, the less limiting the 'circle of captivation' and the more varied the *Umwelt*. With animals, any sense of awareness beyond this horizon is mere anthropomorphism on the part of the human observer; animals simply do not have the capacity to transcend their *Umwelt*. It is this lack of ability to question the horizon of their world that Heidegger interprets as *poor in world*: the idea that the animal is trapped or 'captivated' in a perfectly engineered interlocking set of stimuli and responses. Uexküll uses as an illustrative example of the perfect 'captivation', and state of blissful sympathy with which it is enjoined with its world, the humble tick, which survives with only three 'carriers of significance': the odour of butyric acid characteristic of mammalian sweat, the temperature of 37° characteristic of the temperature of mammalian blood, and the typology of

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<sup>12</sup> The new scientific conceptions of the nature of living things were not only of interest to Heidegger. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his 1950s lecture course on Nature refers to Uexküll along with the theories of other influential biologists such as George Ellet Coghill, whose *Anatomy and the Problem of Behaviour* (1964, originally published in 1929) had been influential in Gestalt psychology. These new conceptions were of interest to phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty because of their non-mechanical, anti-Cartesian and anti-dualistic conceptualisation of nature and the living creature. These philosophers found the naturalists' work useful in their argument with the views of the mechanistic school of Behaviourism which was prevailing at the time (See: Merleau-Ponty 2003: 140–5 and 167–178). For a further discussion of Heidegger's use of Uexküll in relation to Rilke and the 'open' see Agamben 2004.

mammalian skin (see Agamben 2004: chapter 11). But, insofar as all animals (except, according to Heidegger, humans) are defined by their carriers of significance, the number makes little difference: Rilke's animal and Kafka's panther no more 'sees' its environment than Uexküll's tick has a conception of the warm-blooded host that it drops onto. Conversely, human beings have the capacity, according to Heidegger, to form their own world because they, unlike animals, have the potential to see beyond their immediate *Umwelt* and sense the wider context of their existence. It is in this sense of the 'open' as the potential to transcend the horizon of their *Umwelt* that characterises Heidegger's idea of openness in contrast to Rilke's. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty noted in the course notes for his lectures delivered at the Collège de France from 1957–58 on The Concept of Nature: 'Animality, the Human Body and the Passage to Culture', that the *Umwelt* of human beings is more open than that of animals (2003: 178).

Kafka's panther only appears, therefore, to express a sense of freedom in comparison to the hunger artist. Its strong body threatens to burst from the confines of its cage giving a sense of barely-restrained danger that threatens to transcend the boundaries of its prison: 'Even the most insensitive felt it refreshing to see this wild creature leaping around the cage that had so long been dreary' (Kafka 1978: 174). Like Rilke's animals in the *Duino Elegy* the panther seems to carry its *Umwelt* around with it. In contrast, the hunger artist does not convey the full potential of human being. By allowing himself to be placed next to the other animals, Kafka's hunger artist emanates a sense of defeated, caged humanity. In this sense the hunger artist points towards the denial of the potential of human being—and death—whilst the panther points vividly towards a sense of its, more limited, life.

### **'I've had enough of sitting in this painting—I'm leaving'**

It might seem at first that the *Umwelt* of Kantor's self portrayals—the spaces of the painting and the 'Poor Room of the Imagination' in which he imagines his existence—present just as bleak and closed a vision of humanity as that in Kafka's story of the caged hunger artist. However, this is not the effect evoked by these works.

In one of the paintings from 1987, *I've had enough of sitting in this painting. I'm leaving*, the figure of Kantor seems reminiscent of both Rilke's image of a humanity 'twisted around' and also, at the same time, of Kafka's panther. In this painting Kantor depicts himself in the act of stepping out of the fictional, two-dimensional world of the picture into the real, three-dimensional, world of the observer. In this sense the picture would seem to enact an escape from the confines of the *Umwelt* of the picture frame, showing also, perhaps, an unwillingness to simply sit down and accept the given situation of existence. However, the figure's orientation towards the world of the painting and the world of external reality contains a number of paradoxes. The figure of Kantor is in one sense only partially visible, his torso, right arm and shoulder, and left leg are cut off by the left-hand edge of the canvas that he is in the process of leaving. Instead of looking out towards the reality he is stepping into, the upper part of the figure is turned back, like Rilke's image of humanity, to look under his raised left arm, towards the right of the picture at the chair where he was sitting. As with the figure, the chair is only half visible, also cut off, in this case by the right-hand edge of the canvas. Only the left leg of the figure has actually made it to the outside world in the form of a three-dimensional artificial leg attached to the edge of the canvas. In its posture and attitude, the figure of Kantor in this painting might be seen as a 'poor' and 'reversed' version of Lissitzky's *New Man*. In that picture, the clean cut and confident geometry of the mechanical figure is striding dynamically from left to right, not right to left as Kantor's is. Also, Lissitzky's figure looks confidently forward whereas Kantor's looks backwards into the picture. In comparison to Kantor's naked figure, Lissitzky's vibrant figure seems to have more of the 'noble body, furnished almost to bursting point with all that it needed' of Kafka's panther. Its 'limbs' form an open star shape whereas one of Kantor's arms is wrapped awkwardly behind his head, the other is invisible beyond the picture frame and the 'real' left leg that projects into the spectator's space looks decidedly suspicious, carrying a connotation of the collection of artificial limbs in one of the vitrines at the Auschwitz museum. The key difference, however, is that Lissitzky's figure lies wholly within the frame of its picture. It is the attempt of Kantor's figure to exit the frame that lends it its particular power.

[Image removed due to file size]

*Mam dość siedzenia w obrazie. Wychodzę.* (I've had enough of sitting in this painting. I'm leaving, 1987. Courtesy of, Michal Kobiak, and also Dorota Krakowska and Maria Stangret-Kantor for the Estate of Tadeusz Kantor. Thanks to Anna Halczak of the Cricoteka for supplying the image.)

Kantor's painting sets up a paradoxical interplay of references to both the visible and the invisible. The fact that only the fictional portions of Kantor and the chair are visible whilst the implied versions of them in the real world of the viewer are invisible might lead to the interpretation of the painting as indicative of the overall title of the series: *Further on, Nothing ...*. Is Kantor stepping into the void of non-existence, looking back at the past and away from the death he already has one foot in? Is the one protruding leg merely a dead relic? In this sense the paradox of this painting can be seen as the tension between, on the one hand the longing for the past, and for life, and on the other, the potency and courage of being able to choose to step into the void of non-existence.

But on the other hand the protruding leg is three-dimensional in comparison with the two-dimensionality of the rest of the picture. In that sense it is more 'real' than the painted leg. However, it is nevertheless artificial and not animate: it is not a real leg, merely a real artificial leg. There is more than one layer of imitation at play within this work. The artificiality of the three-dimensional leg in one sense actually destroys the illusion it is apparently purporting to create. If that leg is an indication of the 'reality' of the figure—ex-painting—then it would be a very un-übermarionette indeed, a very poor-mannequin-of-a-figure. Paradoxically, when viewed in this way, the painted version of the figure would seem more 'real'. But in that case the illusion of the fiction of the painted figure would trounce reality. But, as with Malevich's *Black Square* and its distillation of the presencing of reality performed by icons, there is a sense in which Kantor's painting confounds the binary opposition of 'real' and 'illusory', 'visible' and 'invisible', fiction and reality. For example, viewed from the perspective of the painted figure inside the painting, the 'real' and 'visible' would equate with the two-dimensional realm contained within the surface of the canvas. The 'illusory' and 'invisible' world for this figure would equate to the four-dimensional spatiotemporal reality of the viewer's world. Viewed from the spectator's perspective it is the

world of the figure in the painting that is 'illusory'. However, what, for the spectator in the real world outside of the painting, equates with the 'invisible'? Surely it is the world of the painting that is implicitly extended past the borders of the canvas in the form of the artificial leg. However, this 'world' seems partially visible, in the form of the artificial leg, and partly invisible in the (non)form of the half of the chair that has been cut off by the right hand edge of the painting (from the spectator's perspective). This aspect of the painting's world does not enjoy a visible physical presence outside of its canvas in the way that the left leg of the painted figure does. The force of this painting is, therefore, partly to do with the impossible act that it is attempting to stage. The spectator of the painting knows that the idea of the painted figure actually stepping out of the canvas into the real world is an impossibility. Even the idea of it is an illusion. In fact the 'reality' of this idea is itself invisible; the artificial limb is merely a stimulus for the idea. This is signalled all the more by the 'poor' and somewhat inept nature of the artificial limb. One could imagine, for example, artists such as Jeff Koons, or Jake and Dinos Chapman, articulating a more polished form for this limb's entrance to the spectator's dimension. Kantor's limb is in the spirit of Bruno Schulz's celebration of the *tandeta* of sham reality in the Street of Crocodiles. It is a Schulzian limb, a poor and shoddy imitation, a joke. Nevertheless, both the spectator and the painted figure confront one another in an uneasy dialogue around this limb, since the work imposes on the viewer the idea of its own movement beyond itself, beyond its immediate painted reality. However, this 'beyond itself', in its very impossibility, is also suggestive of another reality—a 'reality beyond reality', perhaps the 'reality' of eternity, perhaps the 'reality' of death. Like the figures chasing each other around John Keats' 'Grecian Urn', 'For ever warm and still to be enjoyed, / For ever panting, and for ever young (Keats 1973: 345, ll. 26–27), Kantor's painting is forever enacting the potentiality of its own impossible, paradoxical transgression. For the prisoners in Plato's cave, the reality of the machinery of illusion behind them is concealed, as is the sunlit world beyond the cave's entrance. However, in Kantor's painting, it is by no means clear who is in the situation of the Platonic prisoner: the spectator or the painted figure in the picture? Both are arguably in positions of ignorance with

respect to the potential reality proposed by the painting: the painted figure of the world outside his frame; the spectator of that same 'reality' in so far as its very invisibility presages another reality beyond his or her own.

### **The 'Last Supper' in the 'Poor Little Room of the Imagination': The Fatal Return**

Although Kantor's eyes in this painting are 'looking back' in the manner of Rilke's image of humanity, which Heidegger criticises, Kantor's figure is still stepping forward. This paradoxical sense of simultaneous reverse and forward movement between past and future is a characteristic found throughout Kantor's work, but is particularly evident in the late works considered here. In his penultimate major spectacle, *I Shall Never Return*, made during the same period as the *Further on, Nothing ...* series of paintings, Kantor invokes the myth of the return of Odysseus to Ithaca. For Kantor, this myth<sup>13</sup> stood as an allegory of the artist's relationship with reality<sup>14</sup> and the meaning was that 'return' is only possible as a 'return' to death. The figure of Penelope in this respect stands as a symbol for Death as the ultimate reality: she was portrayed in the 1988 production as a young woman who longs for the return of her betrothed. For Kantor, who, like Kafka, found love anew at the end of his life, the paradoxical proximity of Love and Death was a powerful reality.<sup>15</sup> This is why, in his late work, Kantor portrayed Death in the form of an attractive young woman, and why the figure of Penelope, the faithful wife who

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<sup>13</sup> Kantor staged an underground production of Stanisław Wyspiański's *The Return of Odysseus*, a dark dramatic version of this tale, near the beginning of his artistic career, in Kraków, in 1944.

<sup>14</sup> In *I Shall Never Return* Kantor is confronted by his own actors in the guise of roles from his previous productions, culminating in a re-staging of the banquet scene in which Odysseus murders the suitors.

<sup>15</sup> In 1923 Kafka, then just turned forty, met the twenty-five year old Dora Diamant, with whom he fell in love. Dora helped nurse Kafka until his death in 1924 (Murray 2005: 357–384). Around 1985 Kantor met and began an affair with Anna Halczak who became his companion and muse during his final years. The affair continued until Kantor's death (see: Gołubiew 2000: 50–52 for a discussion of Kantor's recognition of the proximity of love and death in his last years).

waits for her husband's eventual return, became the symbol of both Death and Reality, in opposition to the Imagination. The 'life' of human being, viewed from this perspective is truly 'a machine of love and death': a mechanism that produces the particular being of humanity within its finite temporal bubble, hanging in the timelessness of eternity.

The sense of defeat that is present in the hunger artist's death, and in so many of Kafka's protagonists, is not present in Kantor's stagings of his own crossing of the barrier between life and death. At the end of *Today is My Birthday*, the 'Poor Little Room of the Imagination' is filled with cemetery crosses before being overrun by soldiers, police cars, tanks, party-secretaries, secret policemen and murderers. To the accompaniment of the rising and falling strains of, alternatively, Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène* and the funeral march from the second movement of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony, caged and screaming human figures are wheeled about the stage as if they were circus animals on display. In the midst of this carnage, the figures of Kantor's remembered family members stage a slow funeral procession bearing a single wooden plank through the chaos to the front of the stage. They arrange the plank into a crude table which they sit behind as if for a Last Supper, reminiscent of the final image of *Wielopole, Wielopole*. Despite the apparent defeat of this last refuge of the individual:

Against  
these 'powers'  
stands the  
S m a l l ,  
P o o r ,  
D e f e n c e l e s s ,  
but magnificent  
history of  
i n d i v i d u a l ,  
h u m a n  
l i f e .

(Kantor in: Kobialka 1993: 167).

This final tableau, with its intimations of the eternal, advances the silent strength of the bare fact of the fragile, individual, poor human life.

### **Conclusion**

As Agamben noted, rooms or *stanzas* are not just literally rooms but also homes in which human being dwells, a space for the free play of memory. In Kantor's late work, rooms become a poetic space, a means for pointing towards the unveiling of truth about mortality and finitude. In these last works where he repeatedly attempted to visualise the crossing of the borderline between existence and non-existence, even as he approached that frontier himself, Tadeusz Kantor, like his self-portrait attempting to leave his own painting, seems to have been attempting the impossible. He was attempting to linger at the threshold of nothingness as if to see for himself, and to show his spectators, what lies beyond the negation of existence. In this way Kantor can be seen to have organised the live enactment of the icon's manner of presencing truth. In a sense it is reversed again, for while the icon looks at its spectator, and while that is still the case with Kantor's late and last work, Kantor looks back at eternity and, in doing so, encourages his spectators to join him in the contemplation of this impossible but all-enveloping idea. It is, therefore, no surprise that these works can be read in the light of Heidegger and Kafka who both, in their own ways, attempted to characterise the nature of human existence in its relation to finitude—to death. Heidegger envisages an abstract dwelling for human being illuminated by the truth of the revealed true nature of the temporal transience and finitude of human existence, while Kafka's protagonists die like dogs, sometimes glimpsing a distant radiance. Kantor's late paintings and theatre works present a 'poor', but nevertheless positive vision of the human animal: a poor individual temporarily lodged for a while in the 'Poor Little Room of the Imagination'.

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