

Returns of the Rhinoceros

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1. The Rhinoceros leaves Lisbon

The most recent and spectacular return of the Lisbon rhinoceros took place in 2008, when it became the protagonist of a huge (the animal was depicted life-size) painting *Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros*¹ by Walton Ford, a contemporary American painter, who in his works, stylised as colonial illustrations, focuses on the relations between people and animals. Or, rather, he portrays the individual reflected in an animalistic Other.

Ford's painting shows a ship sinking in a storm; a terrified rhinoceros, his legs bound, tries in vain to escape from the wave-swept deck. The moment of the animal's death will at the same time be the instant of its rebirth as a myth, a symbol, a work of art. The end and the beginning of an endless journey.

The nameless rhinoceros, portrayed by Ford, had been a gift, in 1515, of the Sultan of Khambhat to the Portuguese Governor of Goa, in turn to be sent to Lisbon. King Emmanuel I, enchanted with the unusual gift – the first rhinoceros to be seen in Europe since Roman days – arranged for it to have a gladiator fight with a young elephant from his menagerie, in order to find out whether Pliny had been correct in writing that the elephant and the rhinoceros were mortal enemies (the elephant scarpered; the fight did not take place), and subsequently decided to offer the animal in homage to Pope Leon X. The news that the exotic creature would be on public display in Rome enthused natural philosophers and artists, amongst them Albrecht Dürer, who decided to set off for Rome (on foot, as the story has it). However, the rhinoceros never reached Rome: the ship which was carrying it sank during a storm. Paolo Giovio², a papal historian, wrote, 'the animal famous for its outstanding ferocity, which would have been able to confront even an elephant in a fight in the amphitheatre, was abducted by the envy of Italian Neptune', emphasising additionally that the heavy chains which bound the legs of the animal so adept at swimming made its survival impossible, and that the needless death

1 W. Ford, *Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros*, 2008 – watercolour; gouache, lead pencil and ink on paper; property of the author and the Paul Kasmin Gallery.

2 P. Giovio, *Elogia virorum litteris illustrium*, 1548, cf.: <http://www.elfinspell.com/PaoloStartStyle.html>, (date accessed: 4 October 2010).

caused great pain and sorrow in those who witnessed it. It appears that its body, cast onto a shore, was found and its indestructible carapace-like hide stuffed; however, the subsequent fate of the specimen is unknown.

Nevertheless, during the rhinoceros' stay in Lisbon, two testimonies, which would later be used by Dürer in his reconstruction, had been produced. The first was a sketch and a description (in part based on Pliny's one) by a merchant, Valentim Fernandes, which have not survived to the present day. Even so, a fragment of the text had remained, since it found its way into Dürer's³ woodcut:

On the 1st of May, Anno Domini 1513 (sic) from India to Lisbon a live example of an animal known as a rhinoceros was sent to Emmanuel I, the mighty king of Portugal. It is depicted here in its entirety. Its colour is akin to that of the Leopard tortoise and it is very thoroughly armoured with thick plates. In dimensions it is similar to the elephant, but its legs are shorter. It is magnificently equipped for combat. It has a sharp strong horn at the tip of its nose, which it sharpens on stones. This is a victorious animal, a mortal enemy of the elephant. The elephant has a morbid dread of it, because if it were to approach a rhinoceros, that animal would thrust itself in the elephant's direction with its head between its front legs and would rip its guts from below, killing it, from which the elephant would not be able to defend itself. This is because the rhinoceros is so splendidly armed that the elephant would be powerless against it. It is said that the rhinoceros is a swift, good-natured, and even joyful animal. [trans. from Polish translation by A.R.B.]

What is particularly striking in the preserved fragment is the antinomy between the image of the rhinoceros – a perfect armoured vehicle constructed by nature – and its disposition. Thus, the rhinoceros turns out to be a strange hybrid creature, consisting, as it were, of two incompatible parts: the fear-inducing externality – the armour, the costume, the packaging – and its proper 'I', with its sunny and joyful temper. But it is precisely the threatening and ugly 'armour' that determines the way in which the creature is perceived. A kin of the 'gentle savage', a brother to Caliban; forever nameless – referred to as the 'Pope's rhinoceros', 'the Lisbon rhinoceros' or, later, usually simply 'Dürer's rhinoceros' (the telling anachronism

3 'Nach Christiegeburt, 1513. Jar Adi 1. May hat man dem grossmechtigsten König Emanuel von Portugal, gen Lysabona aus India pracht, ain solch lebendig Thier. das nennen sie Rhinocerus, Das ist hie mit all seiner gestalt Abconterfect. Es hat ein farb wie ein gepreckelte [sic] schildkrot, vnd ist von dicken schalen vberleget sehr fest, vnd ist in der gröss als der Heilffandt, aber niderichter von baynen vnd sehr wehrhafftig es hat ein scharffstarck Horn vorn auff der Nassen, das begundt es zu werzen wo es bey staynen ist, das da ein Sieg Thir ist, des Heilffandten Todtfeyndt. Der Heilffandt fürchts fast vbel, den wo es Ihn ankomt, so laufft Ihm das Thir mit dem kopff zwischen die fordern bayn, vnd reist den Heilffanten vnten am bauch auff, vnd er würget ihn, des mag er sich nicht erwehren. dann das Thier ist also gewapnet, das ihm der Jeilffandt [sic] nichts Thun kan, Sie sagen auch, das der Rhinocerus, Schnell, fraytig, vnd auch Lustig, sey.'

being one of the most poignant symptoms of the reversal of the relation between a real-life designate and an artistic sign, which will be the case with this particular phenomenon).

The second document which Dürer used as a model was a sort of advertising leaflet in which the Florentine physician Giovanni Giacomo Penni⁴ described the virtues of the never-to-have-been gift to the Pope. The leaflet has survived. It has the telling headline, ‘The shape, nature and customs of the rhinoceros, brought to Portugal by the captain of the royal fleet, alike the many other beautiful things which originate in the newly-discovered isles.’ Below the headline, there is an engraving which shows the rhinoceros – a disarmingly bumbling effort by an inept hand and, at the same time, probably the only real portrait of the legendary beast, a study from nature. What draws our attention in the picture are the folds of hide, reminiscent of armour; it is presumably not a coincidence that they are very like the equestrian armour of the period (it may well be that the rhinoceros had, indeed, been equipped with similar armour before its anticipated combat with the elephant). It is difficult to believe that we are dealing with a creation of nature. The rhinoceros appears as an astounding fusion of a live creature and something dead; a *sui generis* bio-object. Nevertheless, one is surprised by the huge amount of compassion in the physician’s depiction of the animal. His rhinoceros does not daze with its might; on the contrary – its head is hung low in an abject manner, its back is hunched and its bent legs are bound with shackles. This is not a terror-inducing beast, a proud gladiator, a killing machine, but merely a compassion-evoking aberration, an unfathomable whim of nature, a creature emanating sadness, loneliness and melancholy.

In producing his famous work, Dürer – deprived of the opportunity to see a real-life rhinoceros and compelled to employ Penni’s drawing (fig. 12), the sketch by Fernandes, no longer available to us, and the descriptions left by Pliny (and, perhaps, also Roman coins) – had to demonstrate his vast anatomical and zoological knowledge and imagination. His two drawings and the famous woodcut are surprisingly accurate in comparison to Penni’s drawing. It was probably from his reading of Pliny that one of his errors must have arisen: the German artist placed on the back of the animal’s neck a second horn, which the ‘Pope’s rhinoceros’ did not have, but which had been mentioned by the Roman chronicler. In addition, Dürer endowed it with a slender, spiral shape, reminiscent of the horn with which artists would adorn the head of the mythical unicorn. Incidentally, the unicorn may pass both for a close relative of the rhinoceros (due to its similar hybrid quality and the antinomy resulting from the combination of such features as: power and

4 Giovanni Giacomo Penni, *Forma e natura e costumi de lo rinocerote*, 1515. Cf.: http://www.uhu.es/programa_calidad_literatura_amatoria/etiopicas/num_2/serani.pdf, (date accessed: 27 September 2010).

peace, ferocity and gentleness, the masculine and the feminine elements) and for its opposite (if one were to compare the creatures in terms of ugly/beautiful).

However, the most significant mistake that Dürer made (and the one most laden with consequence) was his armouring of the rhinoceros (fig. 13). Instead of folds of thick hide, in his woodcut we can see scales and plates of the carapace which could be mistaken for armour made of plates of varied texture and pattern, riveted together. In the central part of the animal's back, it forms a shape akin to a saddle – a clear indication that the artist must have been inspired by the equestrian armour of the period. The detailed quality of the depiction notwithstanding, we are faced with a portrait which is, in a sense, imaginary – an allegorical representation. And very influential it was, too, as can be attested by the fact that for the following couple of centuries – until a travelling wonder, a female rhinoceros by the name of Clara (1738–1758) was to arrive in Europe – Dürer's representation was the reference point in art (as can be seen in numerous paintings, tapestries or book illustrations) and science, appearing in zoological atlases (often with a fanciful use of colour). Dürer's 'clothed' or, rather, 'armoured' rhinoceros turns out to be more suggestive and inspiring than the real thing; consciously or not, hundreds, if not thousands, of artists have replicated the error of the German artist or else entered into an open dialogue with his vision (one of the more interesting 20th-century instances of such a dialogue being Salvador Dali's 1956 sculpture *Rhinoceros Dressed in Lace*).

Indeed, Dürer's rhinoceros is a paradoxical being. In a sense, the sudden and dramatic death of its prototype had been indispensable, so that an immortal symbol could be born; an ideal image, an autonomous artistic being, living an extraordinarily intense and fertile life. In a sense, the German artist created the rhinoceros anew; he put it together using conjured up images and ideas (Walton Ford emphasises that Dürer's rhinoceros, in its carapace, is reminiscent of a crab – thus, as it were, its watery demise has invested it with the status of an amphibian creature; in turn, the scales on its legs bring to mind a dragon or a giant lizard). An imaginary portrait has pushed the real portrait out of the consciousness of the viewers – and not by chance. In his *Theory of Semiotics*, Umberto Eco maintains that Dürer was not mistaken, but that he deliberately constructed an iconic representation, a sign evocative of the idea of the rhinoceros:

Dürer portrayed a rhinoceros covered with scales and imbricated plates; as a result this image of the rhinoceros remained constant for at least two centuries and reappeared in the books of explorers and zoologists; and although these latter had seen actual rhinos and knew that they do not have imbricated plates, they were unable to portray the roughness of their skin except by imbricated plates, because they knew that only these conventionalized graphic signs could denote 'rhinoceros' to the person interpreting the iconic sign. (...) Thus one could say that Dürer's rhinoceros is more successful in portraying, if not actual rhinoceroses, at best our cultural conception of a rhinoceros.

Maybe it does not portray our visual experience, but it certainly does portray our semantic knowledge or at any rate that shared by its addressees.⁵

The case of the rhinoceros and its portrayal eternalised by Dürer exposes the tension between the real and the symbolic, which is not so much intense, as ambiguous: the real dies in order to become the symbolic, to grow into a myth. The rhinoceros functions as a sign, an idea, a singular concept, and, as such – now easily recognisable and strongly marked semantically – it can enter into meaningful relationships with other elements of reality, for example with man. Clara, the 18th-century successor of the hapless ‘Pope’s rhinoceros’, appears, for instance, in a contemporaneous anatomic atlas: a print from the book⁶ shows fragments of the muscle and bone structure of a man, ‘undressed’ of clothes and skin, in an expressive pose (which raises a question about his ontological status), accompanied in the background by a strikingly complete and indubitably alive female rhinoceros (fig. 14), peaceable, gentle and contented (she is eating grass, her horn trimmed). In a sense, a role reversal has occurred: here, the animal, immortalised with a quite un-scientific dose of sympathy (a ‘star’ in the court of king Louis XV and the protagonist of numerous works of poetry and paintings), becomes a major player, a mirror held up to man in which to see his own reflection – and to draw conclusions from any similarities and differences observed.

Another portrait of Clara, a painterly one this time, was made in 1751 in Venice. The painter Pietro Longhi commemorated the animal as the attraction of the carnival. On the canvas we can see the creature, eating hay on the ground floor of a building which without a doubt is used for entertaining: from three raised boxes, as if in an amphitheatre, characters, masked and dressed in finery suitable for special occasions, are looking at the animal. Longhi’s well-known painting strongly thematises the tensions between the material and the metaphorical, the natural and the cultural, the occluded and the revealed; placing the rhinoceros in the very centre of the play-off between that which is real and that which is symbolic, a play-off inherent in the most profound idea of the theatre.

2. The rhinoceros in Krakow

This kind of tension which Longhi managed to capture so successfully can also be found in Eugene Ionesco’s play *Rhinoceros*. The text,⁷ written in 1959, has been read in various ways, from a burlesque through a ‘pure’ absurd drama to

5 U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, London 1996, p. 205.

6 *Clara the Rhinoceros*, 1742, a print by Jan Wandelaar from the atlas by Bernhard Siegfried Albinus *Tabulae sceleti et musculorum corporis humani*, published by Johannes and Heinrich Verbeek, Leyden 1747.

7 The Polish translation appeared in: E. Ionesco, *Teatr*, vol. 2, trans. A. Tarn, Warszawa 1967.

a historical allegory,⁸ where the epidemic of turning into a rhinoceros is taken to symbolise the spreading fascination with fascism. It is, however, worthwhile to note the often overlooked fact that, in Ionesco's drama, from one act to the next, the rhinoceroses become more and more beautiful (although also more and more brutal), while the ugliness of the people becomes all the more apparent. What we have here is reversed evolution. Essentially, people do not so much grow the thick skin of a rhino, as shed their human guise to reveal the bestiality, savagery and evil that lurk beneath, under the clothes and under the skin. One could say that we are dealing with the opposite of Dürer's 'good-natured, and even joyful' rhinoceros whose armour makes it a war machine; with Ionesco, humans are animals whom clothes and manners render human.

In 1961, Tadeusz Kantor was invited by the director Piotr Pawłowski to work on *Rhinoceros* in Krakow's Sary Theatre. From the manifesto texts written at the time (partly included in the programme of the performance) a clear picture emerges of the changing paradigm of the stage design. Kantor writes that he is not interested in the anecdotal layer of the play, in replicating the café and the street:

The theatre to which I am referring has long erased the concept of the 'stage set' which functions as illustration of the play. This embodies the worst theatrical tradition. The stage set does not have to, or indeed should not, only function as a location, regardless of its form: constructivist, surrealist, expressionist, symbolic, naturalist or poetic. It has far more important and alluring functions: to localise emotions, conflicts and the dynamics of the action. It can be entirely nonexistent, absorbed by the expression and movement of the actor, replaced by lighting or works of art, the painting or sculpture, which have the qualities of authenticity, in the same way that until now it has usually been a result of applying authentic values for the use of the theatre, a stylisation of dubious value.⁹

Elsewhere, he revises the notion of the costume:

If we assume that the body of an actor, as is the case with any man, is, in terms of its proportions, build and order shaped in accordance with specific practical functions, related to life – the concept of altering these variables and order becomes very tempting; it presents great possibilities, precisely for the actor, of conveying content which extends beyond that life practice which invades from all sides, insistently. I am not certain whether the body of the actor is so sacred – an idea inherited from antiquity and equipped with all possible academic seals – that it should be impossible to shape it more freely. If we agree that historical costume, so frequently used in the theatre, has been deforming the human body in quite a radical way for specific, entirely down-to-earth reasons, that this in itself is what accounts for the contemporary costume (because, as a matter of fact, whatever one puts onto the human body, it becomes deformed to

8 Cf. J.L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, New York, Cambridge, 1981.

9 T. Kantor, *Moja Idea Teatru*, a text which appeared in the programme of E. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, at the Sary [Old] Theatre, Kraków 1961, pp. 17–22.

a greater or lesser degree) – then I see no obstacles to treating the character of the actor more freely (the costume shaping the actor) for artistic reasons and to endowing it with a greater ‘reach’, a magnified spatiality, mobility, changeability, specifically directed tensions, positions which are free yet purposeful in terms of the play. Within such a conception, the individuality of the actor, until now contained only in the facial expressions, the movements, the reactions of the nervous system, stemming from conventional life experiences, should be performing a role much more complicated, but much more pronounced in its expression. It must pervade and invigorate this new organism, which is and ought to be the closest possible fusion of the live matter of human flesh and the shaped stage form.¹⁰

The last sentence seems particularly interesting here. In a sense, it is already a foreteller of bio-objects – the fusion of live bodily matter and the stage form, the formation of hybrids on the borderline of the two worlds. In his costumes for *Rhinoceros*, Kantor fulfils these suggestions; what is more, he creatively develops Ionesco’s ideas. Nudity appears in the performance, and it is a costume – nudity worn as an armour over the body of an actor dressed in a dark leotard; as if the characters were skinned alive – and then put into their skins again, while the skin, removed and returned, becomes a foreign body, a costume that does not fit.¹¹ This is a singular kind of gesture of artistic creation: the creation of a new entity, a hybrid of an actor and a role, of the body and a costume, a biological being and an object (fig. 15). It is as if the rhinoceros had prompted the artist that the relationship between the exterior and the interior is frequently much more complex than would appear, and that it is the ‘packaging’ that often makes the ‘content’. Elsewhere, Kantor wrote:

1961. The staging of Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*.
 I am creating a new concept: THE REVERSED SPACE.
 This is a continuation of a search for a mental space.
 The name itself is perverse, because it does not contain
 any reference or points of comparison
 to space.
 The ‘REVERSED’ space evokes the world, objects,
 characters – not in their ‘positive view’,
 intended for presentation, but in a way that
 a glove or a pocket turned inside out might,
 where the exposed stitches, the hanging threads and bits,
 the meagre, low-quality ‘anatomy’,

10 T. Kantor, *Metamorfozy. Teksty o latach 1938–1974*, comp. and ed. K. Pleśniarowicz, Kraków 2000, p. 235.

11 The war context is also essential in the interpretation of Kantor’s costumes for the performance. Kantor was shattered to find out that the Nazis had used human skin as material for making clothes; this found reflection in his works and deliberations about costumes. Grzegorz Niziołek writes more about this in his paper in this volume.

in no way bring to mind the laws that we know
 apply outside, which shape
 the forms that are rational and made familiar.
 This is a genre of reality which – it has to be emphasised –
 has nothing in common with the oneirism of surrealism,
 nor with Freud's subconscious.
 I am writing an essay called *An Encounter with Dürer's Rhinoceros*,
 the starting point of my search for reality,
 which a little later on I call the Reality of the Lowest
 Rank.¹²

Is Dürer's rhinoceros, with its visible 'rivets' which fasten the plates covering its body – as well as the Clara of the anatomy atlas, proudly presenting her hard, practically indestructible 'carapace' from behind the back of a skinned man – not precisely such an 'inside-out' creature? Perhaps this also explains Kantor's fascination with the ribbing of umbrellas, crinolines, metal frames and the corsets of *Infantas* – those external skeletons, the armour covering the body; as if invented to mock nature.

It is not by chance that soon thereafter (in 1962), a new concept entered Kantor's vocabulary: emballage. The emballage provokes: it so very intensely draws attention to the external, it so much absolutises it that this awakes an overwhelming need to penetrate the other side, that which is hidden, inaccessible, which constitutes the mystery and the essence of the matter. On the occasion of such projects as *The Wardrobe* or *The Anatomy Lesson*, Kantor identified the consecutive layers of clothes and lining with the skin and tissues, questioning the boundary between that which still is and that which no longer is a human being. Such reasoning totally negated the validity of employing ugliness as a normative criterion; a criterion against which the artist had proclaimed a crusade. 'Ugly' frames and packages would endure, like the hide of the drowned rhinoceros, whereas the body would meanwhile fall into dust.

3. The rhinoceros in Nuremberg

The rhinoceros – 'not Who but What', the emballage *par excellence*, because impossible to penetrate or unpack – would become the object of Kantor's 'perverse liking'. The opportunity to meet the creature eye to eye arose in 1968. The artist, invited by Dietrich Mahlow to take part in making the documentary film *Kantor ist da* wrote:

12 T. Kantor, *Rozwój moich idei scenicznych. Określenia*; cf. T. Kantor, *Metamorfozy. Teksty o latach 1938–1974*, p. 240.

On the 28th, the making of a 45-minute film about my painting, happenings etc will start. – I have prepared a script – here are some scenes: (...) we keep on running, a conversation with a rhinoceros in the zoo. A monstrous fat man is sitting at a table in a bistro, totally encased and with a huge rucksack on his back – he can be seen only from behind – my conversation with this something is based on asking questions without receiving any answers...¹³

It is not a coincidence that the rhinoceros encountered in Nuremberg is reminiscent of the Wandering People – one of the permanent devices in Kantor's theatre; in *The Water Hen*, produced in 1967, the Father (Edgar Wałpor), who carried on his back a monstrous rucksack with countless pockets and flaps, looked a bit like a tortoise or a snail, which has grown bound together with its 'home', a bit like an armoured rhinoceros. The artist was fascinated with Krakow and Paris tramps, who 'in an endless wandering, without a destination or a home, shaped by their follies and the passion for *packing* their bodies in coats, blankets, immersed in a complex *anatomy of clothes*, in the secrets of *packages, bundles, bags*, straps, strings, hiding their bodies deep in there from the sun, rain and cold...'¹⁴ turned of their own will – just like the characters in the Ionesco play, who have grown the armour of the rhinoceros' hide – into peculiar hybrids, bio-objects, 'human emballages'. Thus, in the figure of a rhinoceros-outsider and an exile, Kantor's various topoi met (this includes 'art as a journey') (fig. 16).

This is how Kantor described a scene recorded in the film:

I am sitting at the table, in black as always, black scarf and so on.
 Coffee, cigarettes, I have no inkling.
 Suddenly, someone comes in, or, rather, 'something' (like the war-time Ulysses).
 A dirty individual, grey, all wrapped up in rags, some coats,
 as a shapeless bundle,
 nothing like a man.
 The creature carries a monstrous rucksack, almost a part of his – its? body.
 The brute sits down without even a by-your-leave at my table, of course.
 And me, in black, so elegant, black patent shoes, scarf, a wide-brimmed
 hat and all that which some ascribe to me:
 a buffoon-artist.
 But this is all exceptionally necessary here.
 I order a huge cutlet and whatever else.
 'The rhinoceros' throws himself upon it,
 devouring it as is a rhinoceros's wont.
 I wait, then I ask my guest a number of discreet questions:
 where has he travelled from,
 how long did it take,

13 T. Kantor, *List do Anny Ptaszkowskiej*, in: *Tadeusz Kantor. Z Archiwum Galerii Foksal*, Warszawa 1998, p. 28.

14 T. Kantor, *Rezerwat ludzki*, in: *idem, Metamorfozy. Teksty o latach 1938–1974*, p. 360.

is he tired,
 what is he doing here.
 Through the piles of devoured flesh, the rhinoceros replies with grunting
 and with a stifled roar.
 From courtesy questions, I move on to more essential matters:
 life style?
 loner?
 philosopher?
 perhaps an artist?
 The rhinoceros has finished his meal,
 to the last question he only splutters one word
 ‘merde’!
 he gets up, knocking over everything around, that mass of know-not-what
 is moving towards the exit.¹⁵

The artist deconstructs his interlocutor, asking him, first, conventional questions, then, in Witkacy’s parlance, penetrating ones, trying to delineate the boundaries of humanity, while the creature responds with slurping and animal noises. The companion at the table is a rhinoceros – but at the same time it will be the creature that Kantor will address when reading out his 1962 text, a manifesto describing an encounter with Dürer’s rhinoceros. In that manifesto he wrote about the incredible oneness of the rhinoceros and its ‘costume’ which may appear to be an autonomous creature parasitic on its carrier, only finally to outgrow it, to dominate it and, as it were, eliminate it – as the Shadow does, in Andersen’s well-known fairy tale. This is a kind of further stage in the emancipation of the costume in relation to what Kantor had written on the occasion of working on Ionesco’s play, where he had emphasised that the costume deforms the actor:

It is hard to talk here about a skin. All that armature or some hideous casing – as if oblivious of the live mechanism slowly throbbing inside – has shot out in explosions of abundant imagination, strange whims, audacious ideas, a multiplicity of ornamental details, gnarly protuberances, scales, refined ‘embroidery’, braidings, varied nuances.

That almost autonomous creation, inexplicable bizarreness and the pompous pretentiousness of nature place the rhinoceros as an ‘objet d’art’.¹⁶

The rhinoceros is work of art created by the hand of nature; the Dürer rhinoceros being, as it were, a work of art to the nth degree. The encounter between Kantor, the dandy artist armoured in his avant-garde form (hat, scarf), and the rhinoceros, ‘a shapeless bundle’, a ‘mass of know-not-what’, must bring disappointment. Disappointment from which the artist develops the thesis that he has been dealing with a swindler of a costume, parasitic on the human body, which has nothing

15 T. Kantor, *Komentarze intymne 1986–88*, typescript from the Cricoteka Archives, pp. 30–32.

16 T. Kantor, *Metamorfozy. Teksty o latach 1938–1974*, p. 324.

in common with its biological matter, and pretends to be a man. Therefore, he attempts to rumble the ‘pseudo-anatomy’ of the rhinoceros:

As if some parts of the body tried to save themselves,
break out of that prison.
Let themselves be known.
I have decided it is a good opportunity to show anew the character
of man,
in his fate which civilisation has dealt him for centuries.
The theatre of course has come to my aid.
A great place to show off.
What a lot of pretence,
fawning,
posing as someone else,
a perfect fraud
and...
void,
the territory which I in fact adore.¹⁷

The ‘someone, or, rather, something’ swaddled in rags, the ‘shapeless bundle’, ‘nothing like a man’, mannerless and tongue-tied (apart from the single crude expletive) – this is a human being in a humiliating state, in his formlessness approaching ground zero, void. It is not coincidental that 1962, when Kantor writes his text about Dürer’s rhinoceros, is for him a time of crisis: disappointment with art informel and the Zero Theatre; a time of *The Madman and the Nun* (1963), a performance in which a continuous playing with the void is taking place – but also, a time in which the artist becomes interested in another outsider who hides against reality inside an archaic armour – Don Quixote (in that year, Kantor directs, jointly with Jan Biczyski, Jules Massenet’s opera *Don Quixote* at the Krakow Opera).

However, the vulgar and at the same time confused rhinoceros-the-outsider has the upper hand over the dandy artist: it is much closer to the reality which (to Kantor’s irritation) for centuries has been deprived by convention of the right to participate in art; the real rhinoceros dies, the accurate representations of the anatomy of the animal are lost, while Dürer’s vision endures and multiplies *ad infinitum*. Thus, the rhinoceros-the-Nuremburg-Ulysses comes back to demand its rights. That is the reality banished from the world of art, for ever taking its revenge on art. It leads astray and confounds the viewers who are unable (or, rather, unwilling) to perceive the reality for what it is, but are, instead, for ever trying to dress it up in costumes, armour and lace.

17 T. Kantor, *Komentarze intymne 1986–88*, typescript from the Cricoteka Archives, pp. 30–32.

The rhinoceros cannot be rendered naked; an anatomy lesson cannot be performed on it, and the essence of the secret it conceals cannot be reached and made visible to all those who are interested. It is, therefore, a creature which is as bizarre as it is ideal. Its interior and exterior are both counterpoints (if not an antinomy) and inseparable. A perfect dualism – yet, so very different from the natural/cultural dualism of the human being.

It is striking how the relationship between the rhinoceros-wanderer and man evolves. The first descriptions are puzzled to discover, under the layer of the war machine, a disposition and contrasting emotions. Later, the rhinoceros is juxtaposed with fragile man. Ionesco and Kantor discover rhinocerosity in a human being. Talking to the rhinoceros-man in Nuremberg, Kantor leaves open the question of what is more human: his own art, his patent shoes and polite conversation – or the rags, the slurping and the ‘merde’ of the creature. Both one and the other guise turn out to be no more than emballage, a packaging, a chrysalis which enables the survival of that which is the most essential. In that sense, the encounter with the rhinoceros is already a precursor of the Theatre of Death – playing with the void and facing the void; the desperate spinning of cocoons. Kantor returns to the theatre, the place in which the tension between the symbolic and the real is most poignantly visible. The rhinoceros which falls into the sea dies in order to never die again, and so as to become immortal, due to Dürer’s ‘perfect fraud’. The dead function in Kantor’s theatre along similar lines. Immortal – which, however, does not signify heavenly peace, but getting drawn into the vicious circle of return and repetitions. And into the never-ending battle between that which is real and that which is symbolic.