

William Kentridge: The Entanglement of meaning, process and history.

“I’m only an artist. My job is to make drawings, not to make sense”.

W.K. from the production *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (2008)

The first time I encountered the work of William Kentridge was at the New Museum in New York City. It was unlike anything I have seen and experienced before. His mark making, the depth and sheer beauty of his drawings, the symbolism and narrative of his films all mesmerized me. Although his use of drawings coupled with film is not groundbreaking by itself, his approach is nevertheless very unorthodox, and as far as I know, had not been done that way before. As an artist, I was also intrigued by his use of the mediums to convey his message, and reinforced the notion that the barriers and disconnect between dissimilar art practices have evaporated in contemporary art. It all starts with an idea that he draws with charcoal on a piece of paper. Working without a script and storyboard, he sketches intuitively from an impulse. The meaning of his work is unclear at first, but evolves through his unique process that is altered into the final form that we experience in his movies.

“When the process is working as its best, it is the physical activity of drawing that sequence that new ideas throw themselves forward and become integrated in the film.”¹

While in traditional cartoon films, each scene and movement is a separate image, Kentridge makes a myriad of small changes on the same drawing by erasing some parts and modifying it incrementally. He usually takes two frames on his 16mm or 35mm film camera for each alteration, before continuing with the painstakingly process of subtraction and addition. He ends up with a piece that he ultimately exhibits as a single art work of charcoal drawing, but that nevertheless carries a whole temporal history in itself that is as fascinating as its evolution is obscured

from the ultimate viewer. The entire account of each drawing is only revealed in his films, making them in the same breath a unique single piece of traditional art, and at the same time a temporal vehicle of ideas. Yet, the evolution and “ghost images” are often still clearly visible, alluding to the passage of time, and for that matter, of memory, but metaphorically also to some degree of amnesia and the dulling of recollection by many, mostly white South Africans of their charged past. This point is exemplified clearly in the film *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) where the main protagonist of many of his films, Soho Eckstein, a filthy rich industrialist, who owns half of Johannesburg, lies comatose in his pinstripe suit in a hospital bed, being examined by several doctors, also in pinstripe suits, and looking oddly similar to Soho and Kentridge (this resemblance will be explored later in this essay). The disease seems part physical and part political, reflecting on a delusional white elite, trying to survive an unsustainable political environment, echoed by Soho on life support. He awakens from unconsciousness after a harrowing nightmarish dream that pictured him unintentionally hitting and killing a black man with his car and driving on, showcasing ample indifference towards life that seems expendable. The poignancy of the film is revealed in the final scene as the curtains around his hospital bed opens. Soho awakens in good health, pictured crunching the numbers of his business empire, seemingly unaware of what he just experienced, epitomizing an indifference, or maybe amnesia, towards history.

His use of charcoal was initially meant as a tool for exploration until he could master oil paint. While waiting for this to happen, he realized the power inherent in the medium and the possibilities his technique afforded. The method of erasures, smudges and shades of gray, might remind us that the world, even in South Africa, is much more nuanced than the polarizing political discourse it inhabits. Color is added sparingly. But when it is, like in his film “*Stereoscope*”(1999), it becomes a powerful visual element in the otherwise monochromatic illustrations. Straight blue lines run through his “scenes”, becoming connections between the inside and outside world, “*which is constructed by this network of lines of information, of thoughts, of concerns, whatever kind of different connections that we have...*” 2,

alluding to the temporality of the situations and transformative aspect of the socio-political situation. Often his views of a city in chaos or his bleak landscapes are more a representation of his conflicted feelings and memories than the actual depictions. On average, the completion of his projects takes between four to six months, resulting with 20 to 30 scenes, or maybe we should say, reworked illustrations.

*"The process brings certain kinds of meaning to the work... so how ever hard you try to erase the previous image, the traces still remain on the sheet of the pages that is being filmed... so what the technique itself does is have some sense of passage of time, of process, of progression... it's a kind of handwriting, it's a kind of thinking out loud"*³

Traditionally, animations have been used for children's cartoons, and often the characters and objects went through some mind-boggling transformations. William Kentridge doesn't shy away from these possibilities; to the contrary, they become an integral part of his artistic process. To give an example, there is a scene in his film *"The Mine"* (1991) where Soho Eckstein has breakfast in bed, wearing his pinstripe suit. He lowers the plunger of his coffee machine. Instead of stopping at the bottom, the plunger continues through the bed sheets that turn into layers of rock, and descends underground into the mine, becoming an object that digs through the sediment while looking like an elevator of some sort, confounding the viewer. It seems that the only connection Soho has with his employees is through this plunger. He is worlds apart, with the above displaying the cozy and bright existence of Soho and the white class, while the minority native people live underground, working in a dark space, mimicking the hierarchy as well as their skin color. In another poignant scene, Soho is sitting at his usual table, working the numbers of his vast holdings on an antiquated calculator. Eventually, the calculator spews out tiny little dark people, then transforms into a meat grinder and the figures into ground beef. At the end of that scene, the flow of people stops and a rhinoceros pops out. Soho abruptly whisks away everything on the table while he tenderly holds this quintessential African animal in the palm of his hand. This heavy and dangerous animal becomes his affection of love, disregarding the welfare of the people he is responsible for and who made his wealth possible. These sequences and ideas are not premeditated and

illustrate his intuitive process of drawing. The process of erasure and addition in his drawings could also be interpreted through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that gave political operatives the chance to “erase the past” by admitting their misuse of power in exchange for immunity from prosecution. A scene in *Stereoscope* (1999) first depicts the word “give”, and later “for” is added to create the word “for-give”. As the entire nation struggled to come to terms with the injustice, it embarked on a healing process of forgiveness. William Kentridge’s work deals as much with the overall aspects of politics, guilt, memory and amnesia as with the complexity of the individual, by accentuating their absorption in their private lives while the broader society goes up in flames.

The two main characters in his films are Soho Eckstein, the cigar smoking, wealthy business man in pin stripe suits, and his nemesis, Felix Teitlebaum, a reflective person, always drawn naked, who often becomes the muse of Soho’s wife. The likeness of both figures had a different starting point. Soho was inspired by the industrialists depicted by the German Expressionist artists and early Russian posters, and apparently had an eerie resemblance to his grandfather. Meanwhile, Felix has an uncanny likeness to William Kentridge who often used a mirror in the studio to study the gestures and expressions for that figure. Kentridge acknowledges the resemblance and offers this explanation:

“I needed Felix to be a second consistent character throughout the film. So who could he be? The easiest thing was to work in a mirror. So it was by chance that he looked like me. But once he started to look like me, I understood that I had to take responsibility for his actions as well. So this became an element, not necessarily of autobiography, but of working within the realm of who Felix was. The film functions more like a diary than an autobiography.” ⁴

Over the years Kentridge realized that both characters were kind of close to him and they became pretty indistinguishable. Interestingly, it reflects the ambiguity of his upbringing and social standing. It also underscores the ambivalence that many

white people felt about belonging to the privileged class and enjoying all the amenities of power while feeling conflicted about the injustice inflicted towards their non-white compatriots. We cannot separate Ketrledge's work from the complexity and environment he grew up with. His great-grandfather, a Jew and an immigrant from Lithuania (when it was still part of Russia), escaped the pogrom, and experienced what it meant to be persecuted. As a refuge, he went to England before ending up in South Africa. Regardless of his origin or religion, his race elevated his status upon arrival. Ketrledge's grandfather helped shape the political society as a member of the white minority parliament for over 40 years. During that period, South Africa enacted the Apartheid laws. All non-white people basically became second class citizens, with the black inhabitants relegated to townships or black ghettos. Even the groups of South Asian Indians that constituted a significant minority bloc of the population were regarded in higher esteem than the native people. On a side note, it's interesting to acknowledge the fact that Mahatma Gandhi spend some time in South Africa and his experiences of class struggles shaped his view, and ultimately his actions toward the English colonial power in his home country. Unlike his grandfather, William Ketrledge's parents were influential in a different kind of legacy: both father and mother were prominent activist lawyers representing many instances of social injustices and dealt with prominent cases such as the death of Steven Biko in prison at the hands of white police officers or the trial of Nelson Mandela. Speaking of some childhood memories, Ketrledge mentions a *"...a house in which a kind of incandescent rage against what was happening would emerge... there was a real sense of outrage which was then enacted in the courtroom..."*⁵ Vivid visual recollections were part of his youth such as the day he was driving around with his grandfather in Johannesburg and witnessed a black man being beaten in the head by five white people. Or inadvertently seeing a photograph of the Sharpeville massacre in his father's office of a woman with her back blown off or another image depicting a person with only half her head visible. The shock was extraordinary and the memories have haunted him to this day. He was six years old at the time and though he was opening a box of chocolate.⁶

Being from the minority privileged class and a wealthy family that put its livelihood in jeopardy by fighting for the rights of the black people didn't go unnoticed in the young William. His interest in social justice has informed his art throughout his different projects, though his work is rarely overtly political. It's more a reflection of human behavior on a more intimate level than a frontal attack on social hierarchy of South Africa. Although Kentridge's message cannot be mistaken, his concept of political art is more nuanced than the work of some of his fellow compatriots or the rich legacy of that genre. It also shows a certain impotence and helplessness in dealing with a prolonged history of violence and political injustice, as well as the uncertainties of the road ahead. Although Kentridge did not have the answers, he was acutely aware that the changes in progress needed to be more than just handing over the power to the majority non-white people. The description of Soho and Felix obviously portrays the situation from the white perspective, depicting cynicism as well as a sympathetic eye. Good and evil become inseparable and complimentary forces. *"Well, of course, I do identify with Felix. But a certain part of me also identifies with Soho. They both seem to encompass the good and bad qualities that make us human: self-protection, generosity, closeness, ambition, greed, confidence, anxiety, all those things. Those characters are both part of one brain trying to figure out its relation to the world."*⁷ Kentridge argued from the very start that politics and art needed to incorporate the misgivings and challenges inherent in South African reality.⁸

*"Rather than saying, like Lenin, 'What is to be done?', my engagement is politically concerned, but distanced... I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings are certainly spawned by and feed off the brutalized society left in its wake. I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain things. An art (and a politics) in which my optimism is kept in check and my nihilism at bay."*⁹

Political art is frequently associated with agitprop and propaganda art, usually sponsored by certain political organization (e.g. governments) or used in an act of

civil disobedience against the ruling entities. The meaning of the art is often direct and unambiguous. It's obvious that Kentridge was aware and influenced by some of these protest movements and artists, most notably the German Expressionists. Who comes to mind is the painter George Grosz and his depiction of the ruling class in Germany. Or Otto Dix's haunting etchings of the calamities of World War I, or the collages by John Heartfield whose politically explosive photo collages of the Nazis were banned in Germany. Early Soviet filmmakers and the designers of propaganda posters have also heavily influenced Kentridge's art. But he also understood that *"there needs to be a strong understanding of fallibility and how the very act of certainty or authoritativeness can bring disasters."*¹⁰ This knowledge has guided Kentridge's entire career and his artwork has been an important representation of the dramatic changes of the late- and post-apartheid South Africa. He puts the human element at the forefront in a nuanced expression, never in a form of accusation. But bringing meaning and a strong narrative in dealing with issues that are very close and personal to him was of utmost importance. Although he was exposed to the contemporary conceptual and minimal art movement of his time, it struck him *"as completely apolitical and self-indulgent. Also the abstract expressionism of that era appeared to be stuck in abstractionist silence."*¹¹ The isolation from the rest of the world that apartheid brought in all aspects of South African life, including art, might have helped Kentridge develop his signature style. It shielded him from the pressure of the art market for a long time and let him deal with and develop the narrative and style that propelled his career once South Africa was no longer a renegade nation. The world embraced the socio-political changes and was eager to open a cultural dialogue. Kentridge became one of the most visible "exports" with his honest, unvarnished exposure of his country's troubled history. He had shown that political art can be expanded, and through his technique include a *"complex layering of personal, aesthetic and ultimately political memory [that] informs my animated drawings"*¹²

His interest in dealing with memory and guilt always has some significant historical event as a catalyst. His understanding of South Africa delves much deeper than the

Apartheid era and is informed by centuries of European colonialism. Nothing could illustrate this better than when he was asked to direct Mozart's *Magic Flute* (see footnote 1), an opera that showcases the virtues and political ideals of the Enlightenment. If for Immanuel Kant, the Enlightenment was "*mankind's final coming of age, the emancipation of the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance and error*"¹³, for Kentridge it is also the source for colonialism by bringing the message of rationality and knowledge to the "*dark continent*" (W.K).

*"It's not to say the Enlightenment project itself is necessarily false or doomed, but there are disasters that come through the Enlightenment. But what history has shown is that the one thing that is completely toxic—the most toxic combination in the world—is the combination of certainty, of being right, and a monopoly of power... By bringing Enlightenment to the 'dark continent' you have the disasters of colonialism... Whether it's Stalin or Hitler or Pol Pot, each of them has believed they have been Sarastros in their own way. They know what's best for everyone and they have the power to act accordingly. And so the character of Sarastro is kind of this benevolent figure that hides a series of monsters and calamities... I wanted to see if there's a way one could do a colonial production of *The Magic Flute*... and to explore the political underbelly of *The Magic Flute* further. Not to say that this was a secret message that Mozart had—because he didn't—but it's something which we can't not see when we look at history since 1791."*¹⁴

His interest in fusing meaning with process is best exemplified in the multi-media piece *What will come (has already come)* (2007). The historical background is the Italian Ethiopian war of 1935/36 that resulted in the military occupation and annexation of the African country by the forces of the dictator Benito Mussolini. The medium is the "prehistoric filmic process" of anamorphosis (see footnote 2).

Footnote 1: W.K designed the stage as well as directed the entire production of the *Magic Flute*, probably being the first visual artist to do so.

Footnote 2: *Leonardo's Eye* (Leonardo da Vinci. 1485) is the earliest known definitive example of perspective anamorphosis. The prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux may also possess this technique because the oblique angles of the cave would otherwise result in distorted figures from a viewer's perspective. (From Wikipedia)

Distorted drawings on a table appear normal when viewed from a particular vantage point and are reflected into a cylindrical mirror. As Kentridge has never shied away from using outmoded apparatus in exploring historical and personal issues, his use of the anamorphic medium is a perfect metaphor that emphasizes the notion that nothing is as straight as it might seem, and that the truth and history are tinted by our own personal perspective. This couldn't ring more true to a conflicted white South African man, attacking his own privileges, contrasting the ambiguities and ironies that are so much part of his nation's legacy, and for that matter his entire artwork. Whether dealing with the problems of his own country in his early films, or the examination of the Russian government's repression of the artistic avant-garde in the opera *The Nose* (2010) and the multi-media installation of *I'm not me, the Horse is not mine* (2010), or the exploration of colonialism as a direct result of the Enlightenment in Mozart's *Magic Flute* (2005), his interest and overlying message has always been of metamorphosis, or more broadly of social transformation. Nothing could have illustrated this better than his process of erasures and additions in his films or the usage of the anamorphic process. They question the validity of any definite statements about our past and for that matter, of our historical memories. I have rarely seen an artist's oeuvre where process and meaning compliment each other so perfectly.

Andreas Rentsch, Spring 2012

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