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WILLIAM KENTRIDGE

January 28 - April 11, 1999

The William Kentridge exhibition constitutes a very complete exploration of the work this South African artist has been developing over the last ten years. Kentridge alternates between drawing and print-making, a medium he has been using since the 70s, with incursions into the world of theatre; at the same time, one of the essential aspects of his artistic output is the making of animated films, which are the central core of this exhibition.

The descendent of German and Lithuanian Jews, William Kentridge was born in Johannesburg in 1955. He studied politics and African culture in the 70s, and before long found himself taking part in theatre workshops and art classes, activities in which he had first become involved as an adolescent at the Johannesburg Art Foundation (JAF). Opened in 1972, during apartheid, the JAF was based from the outset on non-racist principles, offering art training and opportunities to a variety of different groups, and providing grants for the poorer students. For a number of years the artist taught print-making at the JAF and, although he started off by producing a series of paintings, he soon came to centre his attention on the graphic work and the drawing, and went on to develop his interest in film and theatre.

The art of William Kentridge is a personal expressive attempt to engage with the nature of memory and the human emotions, and the relationship between

desire, ethics and responsibility. His works deal with ill-treatment and suffering, guilt and confession, domination and emancipation in the context of the post-colonial world of the end of the 20th century. Even as it evokes issues which characterize the human condition in general, Kentridge's art is particularly rooted in his place of origin, a nation marked by racial divisions and the laws of apartheid. Nevertheless, his works do not simply “illustrate” apartheid; instead, they put across their message by way of metaphor.

The style of drawing adopted by the artist reveals reminiscences of the radical, anti-establishment art of the avant-gardes of the early 20th century, especially Berlin dadaism and German expressionism, including, of course, a Max Beckmann. These drawings are combined on the one hand with contemporary techniques such as video and installation. and on the other with music and subtitles which recall the remote era of silent film. At the same time, many of them allude to specific works by Goya, Hogarth and other artists of the past. For Kentridge, these memories and vestiges of historical sources afford access to a different level on which to explore the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting.

The technical procedure developed by William Kentridge in his films consists in creating a series of charcoal and pastel drawings on paper; each of these is then altered in the course of the rubbing out, re-drawing and photographing of the different stages of its evolution. Thus, instead of being constructed on the basis of thousands of drawings, as would be the case with traditional animation, Kentridge's films are made up of hundreds of moments of the process of a small number of drawings, each one corresponding to a particular scene. The working process is left visible and this introduces a spasmodic effect (softened by the music), by means of which the spectator is made aware of the spatial and temporal disjunctions of the drawing instead of being presented with the illusion of fluid movement.

William Kentridge held his first exhibition in 1979, and since then he has had numerous one-man and group shows in Great Britain, Norway, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Australia, and has been present at the Biennials in Sydney, Istanbul, Havana and Johannesburg, at the shows "Inklusion/Exclusion" (Graz, 1996), "Campo 6, the Spiral Village" (1996) and "Città Natura" (1997), as well as at Documenta X in Kassel (1997) and at the Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil (1998).

Films being presented in the exhibition:

Ubu tells the truth, 1997 (8 min.)

In this video Kentridge mixes animation drawing and archive drawings relating to the bloody incidents of the last thirty years of South African history. The work was originally part of the stage production *Ubu and the Truth Commission* which Kentridge created for the Handspring Puppet Company in 1997.

Films of Soho Eckstein: the city

Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris, 1989 (8 min. 2 sec.)

Monument, 1990 (3 min. 11 sec.)

Mine, 1991 (5 min. 50 sec.)

These are the earliest of a series of animated films which Kentridge began making in 1989, in which the central character is Soho Eckstein, a wealthy Johannesburg property developer. These films were made during South Africa's period of transition from the apartheid regime towards the new democracy.

Films of Soho Eckstein: ageing

Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old, 1991 (8 min. 22 sec.)

WEIGHING... and WANTING, 1998 (6 min. 20 sec.)

The first of these two films was made shortly after the decriminalization of political organizations in South Africa and shows crowds moving around the city of Johannesburg, in explicit reference to the placard-carrying masses who came out onto the streets. The second film deals with Soho Eckstein's efforts to achieve domestic harmony in the midst of his public ambitions.

Films of Soho Eckstein: exile

Felix in Exile, 1994 (8 min. 43 sec.)

History of the Main Complaint, 1996 (5 min. 50 sec.)

The first film was made just before the first general elections in South Africa, in 1994. Kentridge is reflecting here on the loss of historical memory, on how memory disappears in the same way that the landscape erases the marks of the events of which it has been the setting. *History of the Main Complaint* was made at the time of the first public declarations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and raises questions about personal and historical responsibility or guilt.

Ulisse: ECHO scan slide bottle, 1998.

The material shown in this triptych screening is taken from the opera *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse* which Kentridge produced in collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company in 1998. Through the use of medical apparatus, Kentridge sets out to show how the images hidden in the interior of our bodies can give us clues to the fragility of the spirit, and questions the widespread tendency to trust in appearances.

Exhibition co-produced by the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels
and the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)

Exhibition concept: Piet Coessens and William Kentridge.

Curator from the Exhibition at MACBA: Manuel J. Borja-Villel

Itinerary: Palais des Beaux-Arts, Bruselas
Kunstverein München
Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona
Serpentine Gallery, London
Neue Galerie Graz am Landesmuseum Joanneum

Open to the public: From January 25, 1999.

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William Kentridge

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

I INTRODUCTION

William Kentridge was born in 1955 in Johannesburg, South Africa, where he still lives and works. His art is an expressive and personal attempt to address the nature of human emotions and memory, the relationship between desire, ethics and responsibility. He investigates the shaping of subjective identity through our shifting notions of history and geography, looking at how we construct histories and what we do with them. An elegiac art that explores the possibilities of poetry in contemporary society, it also provides a vicious, satirical commentary on that society. It posits a way of seeing life as process rather than as fact, and constantly questions the meaning of artistic practice in today's world.

Kentridge has always been socially and politically engaged. While acknowledging that art is historically and ideologically constructed however, he does not use the tools of deconstructive critique (an approach to art based on the linguistic paradigm, whereby the artist takes apart and reveals through rational analysis the mechanisms of underlying structures of power). Rather, his animated films appear at first glance to suggest simple narratives, adopting an apparently traditional, figurative style that recalls the world of cartoons and illustrated books. Kentridge's work is 'political' without being prescriptive or polemical. He probes the diseased body politic without suggesting solutions. At most, one might say that it is a therapeutic art, not an ideological one.

Writing about Kentridge from a distant cultural perspective is problematic. The issues he raises in his works are informed by the histories of the African context from which his art emerges, but to a South African reader, the contextualisation of his art within the landscape of that country's cultural production or in relation to apartheid would seem both to over-simplify it and to state the obvious. And discussing his work from a European point of view is particularly complex because of Europe's historical responsibility in the emergence of apartheid and the exploitation of Africa. Added to this is the fact that Kentridge draws upon a European legacy of oppositional art from Goya to Hogarth to Beckmann, but at the same time – despite the spread of sophisticated communications systems and an increasingly global art world – his work is oddly out of sync with current trends in Europe. Though he uses the prevailing technology of video projection, for example, the drawings that form the basis of his animated films retain a more old-fashioned appearance.

David Goldblatt, from the series *The Transported of Kwa-Ndebele* 1987, black and white photograph

* All quotations are from William Kentridge's recent correspondence and conversations with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, unless otherwise stated.

« The question of naiveté has a colonial/political origin I think:

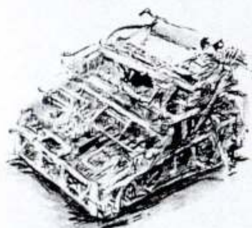
a) From the essentially domestic nature of the peripheral art scenes – art made for domestic use.
b) An anxiety not to copy styles or interests of the metropole – while acknowledging the attraction of the glossy magazines and shining galleries.
c) A need therefore to have a solid ground for the work even if this means reinventing the wheel.
d) A perceived need for the work to justify itself instrumentally – i.e. it has to be legible, understandable. »*

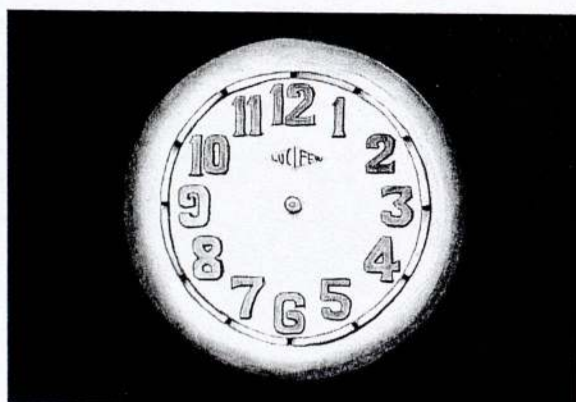
Yet, to someone like myself, living in Rome, far from New York, London and Paris, in an ancient centre of western culture that has been slumbering on the cultural periphery throughout this century, linguistically isolated from the global language (English) of art, business and the Internet, the nature of Kentridge's ethical and artistic endeavour has its own particular relevance. It explores a border zone where identity is hybrid, multiple and shifting, between remembering and forgetting, between belonging to a tradition of fine art and being relegated to its margins.

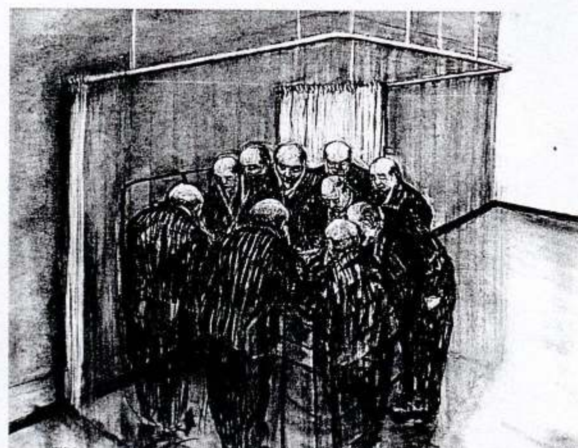
In the aftermath of the Cold War, since the decline of ideological confrontation and stalemate between East and West, European identity has been shattered into myriad local, provisional selves, and new waves of immigration are adding yet more diasporic dimensions to this changing situation. Economic crisis and competition for resources within Europe, as well as the weakening of universalist ideals of modernity and of the labour movement, have ushered in a renewed xenophobia, a fear of immigrants. Kentridge's constantly changing drawings, which create merging, overlapping or dividing personae, provide commentary on analogous yet different issues of identity as they emerge on another continent. While in Europe fresh divisions appear, the irony of South Africa today is that it is striving to forge a new, post-apartheid 'rainbow nation' in a post-national age in which the globalisation of world economies is having devastating effects on communities and their shifting identities.

To those living far away from South Africa, Kentridge's work offers a point of entry, an empathetic way in to understanding the reality and complexity of life there, in contrast to the rhetorical, stereotypical and simplified view that media reports grant us of great events in that country. He presents intimate, personal narratives of daily existence suggesting the complexity of identity. By combining drawing, movement and music, his stories are suggested with fluidity. He encourages a longer time for reflection on the human condition in a fast-moving world that tends to see this approach as out of date.

Kentridge's drawings, animated films and videos, theatre and opera productions deal with abuse and suffering, guilt and confession, subjugation and emancipation in the post-colonial,





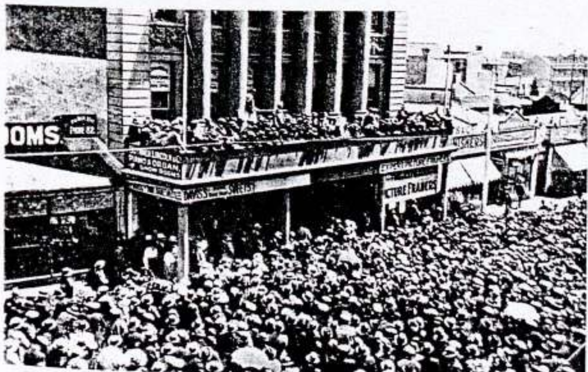


late 20th century. While evoking issues that characterise the human condition in general, his is an art particularly rooted in its place of origin, a nation wrought by racial division and the apartheid laws that prevailed until the 1994 general elections brought the ANC (African National Congress) into power. These cathartic works do not 'illustrate' apartheid, however, they communicate through metaphor. The analogy of medical pathology is often used to indicate a sickness both within the individual and in society. A sense of yearning for healing is expressed as a longing to flood the burnt, barren, urban wasteland around Johannesburg with blue water, slippery fish, and love. The 'medicine' Kentridge suggests as a cure for this pathology is to understand the complicated ways in which we construct ourselves.

Though Kentridge's work may appear archaic, it is in fact highly contemporary. A sense of belonging to a cultural 'periphery' of Europe, and therefore of *geographic* distance from a 'centre', is translated into the visual imagery of objects that represent a *historical* distance from today's accoutrements. The clothes, telephones, typewriters and other items in his animated drawings recall an early 20th-century colonial world as perceived by a child in the 1950s and 60s looking at illustrated books from the 1940s. The simultaneous presence in the work of CAT scan machines and other examples of modern equipment, however, indicates the way in which experience is layered: the computer exists side-by-side with the old-fashioned telephone.

Similarly, Kentridge's portrayal of anti-apartheid demonstrations in the 1980s and early 1990s recalls photographs showing crowds of striking miners in Johannesburg in the previous part of the century, such as the famous strike of March 1922. The drawing style adopted by Kentridge is also reminiscent of early 20th-century oppositional vanguard art like Berlin Dada and German Expressionism. These drawings are combined with the contemporary techniques of video-projection and installation on the one hand, and music and captions recalling the distant age of silent movies on the other. Furthermore, many of them make reference to specific works by Goya, Hogarth and other artists of the past. This procedure owes nothing to the critique of authenticity that has developed over the past two decades into postmodernist appropriation and simulation of art. For Kentridge, these memories and traces of art-historical sources provide yet another level on which to explore the mechanisms of forgetting and remembering.

Kentridge's simple, immediate drawings are a rebellion against the anonymity and homogeneity of 'contemporary' languages of representation, as well as the non-representational visual art developed during the Modern Age. His use of the traditional techniques of printmaking and computer animation go beyond the modernist tactic of reduction. Yet his refusal to engage in illusion, his need to acknowledge the medium, method and process by which the representation is achieved owes something to a modernist notion of authenticity.



Olivetti Calculator 1989, charcoal on cream paper, 106 x 95 cm

Drawing used in the animation for *Faustus in Africa!* 1995 charcoal on paper, 52 x 63 cm

Drawing from *History of the Main Complaint* 1996 charcoal and pastel on paper, 120 x 160 cm

White miners' strike, Johannesburg, 1922

Drawing from *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* 1991 charcoal and pastel on paper, 70 x 100 cm

1.
Everlyn Nicodemus and Kristian Romare, 'Africa, Art Criticism and the Big Commentary', *Third Text*, London, Winter 1997-98, no. 31 pp.63-65

The animated films are achieved by creating a series of drawings in charcoal and pastel on paper; each is successively altered through erasure and re-drawing and photographed at the many stages of its evolution. Thus, rather than being constructed from thousands of drawings, as in traditional cel animation, Kentridge's films are made up of hundreds of moments in the ongoing progress of a small number of drawings, each corresponding to a scene. The process of facture remains visible, establishing a jerky effect (tempered by music) that causes the viewer to perceive the spatial and temporal disjunctures of the drawing, rather than creating an illusion of fluid movement. And, because erasure is necessarily imperfect, traces of the preceding stages of each drawing can still be seen. Like the echoes of past art that pervade the drawings, these smudges and shadows reflect the way in which events are layered in life, how the past lingers in the mind and affects the present through memory.

Preliminary drawing for *Industry and Idleness* and *Wouzeck* 1987, 103 x 82 cm

Untitled 1991, gouache and charcoal collage, 160 x 120 cm

Just as Kentridge has questioned the racist stereotypes of 'white' art produced during apartheid, particularly idyllic landscape painting, he has also carefully avoided speaking on behalf of the 'native'. Though he has never engaged in the paternalistic portrayal of the colonised African body, he has depicted various black Africans as characters. Present in *Monument* (1990), in *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992) and in many early drawings, for example, is a figure sometimes referred to as 'Harry' in Kentridge's writings and lectures, representing a leader of the dispossessed and based on a homeless person who lived in the streets near the artist's home. In *Felix in Exile* (1994), the black, female character, 'Nandi' acts as a surveyor of the land, explorer of the stars and witness of events. Other white South African artists have sometimes attempted the conceptual and critical denouncement of the stereotypical or racist representation of the black African body through its ironic presentation, parody and reversal. Perhaps aware of the contradictions that such practice might engender, Kentridge has never taken this approach. Instead, he acutely expresses a cultural dilemma, to which the only alternative would be artistic silence.

« I disagree that all portrayals – the fact of portrayal – entails paternalism. It implies that all representations are equal – that one does not have to look at them. I think Nandi is interesting in this regard. I struggled for a long time to find, not a form, but a persona for her. Victim yes. But she had to be more, too. When she gained her theodolite and started drawing the landscape herself, she found her place in the film. Perhaps she could be a displaced self portrait – is this imperialism to the nth degree? Maybe, but it ceased to be a problem that interested me. I was then intrigued by my personal displacement towards her – the eyes looking at each other. »

Everlyn Nicodemus and Kristian Romare have recently summed up the current position in the South African art world: 'The post-apartheid art situation is stamped by the drastic inequality of the white and the black art scene, the latter, where it exists, being out of step to a degree that cannot be conjured away by liberal discourses or by simply leaving out the colour label (...) What Steve Biko wrote twenty-seven years ago on the games of white liberals, might prove to be applicable to the split art field today.'[1] Kentridge's dilemma is that he cannot make modernist paintings – that is, he cannot pursue the fiction of making South Africa look 'white' – yet he cannot speak for the 'black', nor provide a platform or voice for the 'other'. He can only explore a zone of uncertainty and shifting meanings, through the portrayal of his own personal situation, a 'double-bind' where guilt and expiation express the condition of the privileged.

Emancipation is therefore both a theme in Kentridge's art and a principle underlying its form, media, technique, scale and experience.

Since the late 1970s, Kentridge has worked with a wide array of media and techniques, from charcoal drawing on paper to etching, from film to animation, from acting and set-designing to directing numerous theatrical productions. He has created video installations, and projected images onto buildings. He has made large-scale drawings on the landscape, and an outdoor work using fire. Often, Kentridge engages in collaborative projects with other artists. Currently, he is presenting his first opera production with Handspring Puppet Company, *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse* (1998), based on Claudio Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (1641). But however different and varied the languages he uses, they all have the simplicity and immediacy of a drawing, balancing design and control with improvisation and chance.

Kentridge is of Lithuanian and German-Jewish descent. His maternal great-grandfather emigrated to South Africa just before the Boer war in the late 1800s, driven out of Eastern Europe by the Pogroms, and becoming a Hebrew teacher in Cape Town. His paternal great-grandfather, Woolf Kantorowitz, who was a 'chazan' (a chanter) and a 'shochot' (a ritual slaughterer), also travelled to South Africa at the turn of the century, changing his name to Kentridge. His maternal grandmother, Irene Newmark, who became Irene Geffen by marriage, was the first woman barrister in South Africa. Kentridge's father, Sydney, is among the most renowned lawyers in the country, particularly engaged in defending victims of abuse during apartheid and involved in key political cases of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, including the inquest into Steve Biko's death in 1977, the Treason trials and the Mandela trials. Kentridge's mother, also an advocate, has been influential in the birth of the Legal Resources Centre. This organisation, which survives on grants and donations, provides legal assistance for people with no money to pay for it.

« My grandfather, Morris Kentridge, became a lawyer and a parliamentarian for the Labour Party. He was imprisoned as a socialist in the 1920s. He stayed a parliamentarian for Troyville, a suburb of Johannesburg, until the 1950s when he died. His wife, May Shaffner, my father's mother, was the daughter of a locksmith. Morris is interesting because in some ways he becomes a model for Soho Eckstein. There is an early linocut, which I made in the 1970s, based on a family photograph on the beach, where Morris Kentridge is sitting in a deck chair in his pin-striped suit. And of course, that only makes Soho a displaced self portrait: there is a strong male family resemblance down the generations. There is even one moment in *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* where he looks like my maternal grandfather.

My father was involved in a number of key political cases of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. I had a different childhood from the average white South African one. I went through school knowing that outrageous things were happening in an abnormal society. For many of my colleagues in school, there was no apparent sense of their being in anything other than a natural world. I was more aware, and in certain ways, more knowledgeable. So, in many senses, law was the obvious field for me to have gone into, and is what I would have been best at. Public speaking, thinking on my feet, were natural and easy skills. Being an artist was a very unnatural and hard thing for me to do. »

2.
Statement in *William Kentridge: Drawings for Projection. Four Animated Films*, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 1992 and in French in *Revue Noire*, no.11, Paris, December 1993 - January 1994, p.23

3.
From interview published in: G. Davis, A. Fuchs, *Theatre and Change in South Africa*, Harwood Academic Publishers, Amsterdam, 1996

A student of Politics and African Studies in the 1970s, Kentridge took part early on in drama workshops and art classes, which he had begun even as a teenager at the Johannesburg Art Foundation under Bill Ainslie. Established in 1972, during apartheid, the JAF was founded on non-racial principles, offering art training and opportunities to different groups, with bursary funding for students unable to support their studies.

« I have never been able to escape Johannesburg. The four houses I have lived in, my school, studio, have all been within three kilometres of each other. And in the end, all my work is rooted in this rather desperate provincial city. I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings and the films are certainly spawned by, and feed off, the brutalised 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 endings. An art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check and nihilism at bay… »[2]

For several years, Kentridge taught etching a JAF, and although he made a number of earl paintings, it was on the 'poorer' medium o drawing and printmaking that he soon focuse his attention. His first exhibition in 1979 includ ed a number of monoprints and some drawings These dark grey, claustrophobic works show fig ures in pits being watched from above by faceles individuals, a vision of people living in a close society from which there is no escape. By asso ciation, one thinks of the walled gardens an barbed-wire-fenced homes of Johannesburg' residential areas. These works prefigure late images of enclosure, such as the curtains aroun the hospital bed in *History of the Main Complain* (1996) or the anatomy theatre setting of th recent *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse* (1998).

« When I started art school, I used to do oil paintings, and I still make 'Sunday paintings'. But oil painting is always, in some sense, trying to get an effect, something that looks like a nice picture. Drawing is a very different process. The speed of putting the marks down, the fact that they are dry yet changeable, and that you can alter them as quickly as you can think (you don't have to wait for the paint to dry and then scrape it off), gives the work a kind of immediacy. Also, I'm insecure about colour: I don't trust my taste. Charcoal has a range of grey scales, and there are moments of colour that can come through, but the work is not constructed around colour; it is constructed around line and tone. The drawings don't start with 'a beautiful mark'. It has to be a mark of something out there in the world. It doesn't have to be an accurate drawing, but it has to stand for an observation, not something that is abstract like an emotion. I never say, 'I have to make a sad drawing'. »

The Conservationists' Ball II (Game Watching) 1985, charcoal, pastel and gouache on paper, (second panel triptych), 120 x 200 cm

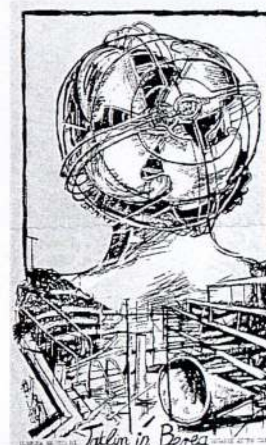
Max Beckmann, *Caffé* 1921, drypoint etching, 337 x 256 mm

Experiencing feelings of inadequacy as a visual artist, however, Kentridge stopped making static works and developed his interest in film and theatre – with which he had already been actively involved since the mid-1970s as a member of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, Johannesburg. In 1981-82, he went to Paris with his wife Anne Stanwix, an Australian medical doctor, where he studied mime and theatre at the Ecole Jacques Lecoq.

> « After I had come back from theatre school in Paris, and had decided I wasn't going to be an actor, and I wasn't going to work as a painter, and I had to restrict myself to one craft, I thought I would be a film-maker. So I spent several years as an art-director of other people's films, learning the craft. One of the things that I learnt was the way the space in which people moved – film space – was so completely arbitrary and changeable. One's normal, Renaissance sense of perspective – how rooms are created – was completely interchangeable once you started working with flats for walls, which you could shift or change. So the drawings that emerged from the film work had to do with the freedom that came from being able to play with space. »[3]

It was not until 1984 that Kentridge returned to drawing, having learnt that the artificiality of space and lighting used in film could be applied to drawing. He engaged in a series of very large works on paper, sometimes narratively grouped in triptychs, which would later develop into the well-known animated films that he calls *Drawings for Projection*. These sketchy drawings present charged, haunted settings, rarely the open, barren landscapes of his later works. By entirely filling the space of the paper with different scenes, Kentridge presents multiple points of view, close to the Expressionist and post-Cubist structure of Max Beckmann's satires. Multilayered and dynamic, they combine deep, abysmal spaces with compressed perspectives. They are inhabited by women in pearls and men in evening dress – recalling a decadent Weimar-style bourgeoisie and a carefree café society. Surrealist, allegorical images of animals and objects combine with the detritus of a recklessly urbanised wilderness. A sense of irony lies within the layers of these dramatic drawings. Works like the silkscreen triptych *Art in a State of Grace, Art in a State of Hope, Art in a State of Siege* (1988) frequently make reference to early, utopian vanguards such as Russian Futurism and Constructivism. By alluding to these socially engaged art movements in works that evoke to a far off, distant past, Kentridge presents a paradoxical approach to modernism, implying a nostalgia for these utopias, while suggesting that they are gone for good, that they have failed.

Art in a State of Grace 1988, silkscreen, 160 x 100 cm



Art in a State of Hope 1988, silkscreen, 160 x 100 cm

Art in a State of Siege 1988, silkscreen, 160 x 100 cm

4.
Interview with Amanda Jephson and Nicholas Vergunst, *ADA*, no.4, Cape Town, December 1987 - January 1988, pp.6-7

WK: The artists working in Weimar were working in a state of siege. In other words, the subject matter was about the possibility of failure, of attempts to transform the world, and the project is similar to mine. Iconographically, there are many images in my work that refer to men in dinner suits. In most cases, they have been either copies from photographs, or derive from people I saw one evening at the State Opera House in Pretoria. But there is also, obviously, a danger of being lost in a wonderful nostalgia for that era. What can one say about it? It was the last (with the exception of the Mexican muralist painters), great flowering of political art.
What about ideology? How does that interact with culture and politics? You speak a lot about culture and you speak about politics…
WK:… But not about ideology. I think this is so, because 'ideology' is a word that is used to make a broad summary of the cultural activities and productions of a period. I was specifically interested, not in the simplification of that, but in expanding, elucidating its contradictions and complexities…
How do you feel about being part of South African society?
WK: It's a mixture between feeling absolutely directly involved and committed, and the next minute feeling that it's all too hard and I must leave; and then thinking, you know, this is 'home'; and the next moment thinking of a villa in Italy. I would like to make those sort of quick internal changes coherent in my work. I do believe they are fundamental structures of the way everybody operates and works. In other words, it's not a question of free-association or stream-of-consciousness but, as an image of incoherence, it represents coherent life activity.[4]

The triptych, *Dreams of Europe* (1984-5), i closely linked to the recent *Il Ritorno d'Uliss* (1998) and stems from Hogarth's *The Rewards o Cruelty*. It represents a naked body lying on round table, being martyred by men in evenin coats, smoking cigars. Indifferent to the human ity of their victim, they are intent on their ques for modern knowledge through anatomica study of the body, which becomes a porno graphic spectacle.

« I only recently learnt that triptychs were originally a religious form, used as altarpieces. Beckmann, and particularly, Bacon were the first artists whom I noticed employing the form. There are two different ways in which my triptychs refer to panoramic, patchwork photography. Firstly, you have a series of images of the same place, but each is different because that space is occupied by a different centrepiece each time. Time has passed between each image, objects have been rearranged and even the viewpoint has changed slightly. Secondly, and far more importantly, is the dislocation of space. Again, the impulse derives from successive images of the same place on a roll of film. The viewpoint is slightly changed and the perspective altered. Making a patchwork out of several photographs, the overlaps and dislocations

are the exciting moments. You set up continuity between images and then refuse to let it happen.

Working with drawings in series also has to do with storytelling and with cooking and eating. The panels are the separate courses. If all the elements were together it would be too rich and not necessarily delicious either: asparagus and chocolate mousse in a porridge, rather than two very distinct moments in a meal (...) There is no necessary continuity between the images. There is no allegorical, one-to-one meaning in the symbols that enables them to read like a book. But neither is it arbitrary or 'anything goes'. The story of the panels has to be told, finally, by the viewer. But not all are equal: there are good storytellers and bad, and like the topological transformations, there is, as likely as not, no solution. It is about the impossibility of factuality. Facts are not enough. The dancers in the *Conservationist's Ball* are not on their own: whenever they dance there are always the police hyenas on roller skates outside and the flagellation in the inner chamber. Facts are not simple. They bring a whole train of mud and slime with them, or like a comet, a train of frozen ice ahead of them. Facts are not fixed. The single viewpoint of the head-on image is on shaky epistemological ground – the deceitfulness of the view camera is a whole new area to investigate. The contradictions and dislocations are the interesting things, rather than the consistencies. It is not the strength of passion but its briefness that interests me. »[5]

In an attempt to create drawings that would 'breathe', and after a number of earlier experiments in film and animation, in 1989 Kentridge began to create his series of short animated films, *Drawings for Projection*: *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* (1989), *Monument* (1990), *Mine* (1991), *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* (1991), *Felix in Exile* (1994), *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) and *WEIGHING... and WANTING* (1998). Chronicling the rise and fall of Soho Eckstein and his alter ego Felix Teitlebaum, these films present the ills of avidity and power and the struggle for emancipation. Narrative emerges through a sequence of related scenes and recurring 'personae' reflecting different perspectives on the world and various parts of the artist's own self. The magnate Soho Eckstein in his pin-striped suit buys land, builds mines and develops his 'empire', which finally crumbles. The sensual dreamer Felix Teitlebaum, always naked, falls in love with Eckstein's wife and enters into a battle between good and evil with Eckstein against the background of the pain and suffering of exploited miners and land. The most recent films, *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) and *WEIGHING... and WANTING* (1998), portray more intimate, psychological and personal scenarios about consciousness and how to deal with memory and guilt in a post-apartheid era.

Kentridge's sketchy drawing in many of the films, his chalk-line marks on black in *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1997), along with his 'poor man's' animation technique, in which the film progresses jerkily through stop-shoot techniques, recall utopian animation films of the 1960s. These anti-Disney experiments were a return to rudimentary techniques, made in an age in which animation was no longer a popular film form among adults, as it had been from the 1920s through to the 1950s. In the hands of these avant-garde artists, addressing adults and resisting the commodification of animation, this was a radical approach. When these techniques were appropriated by ads and music videos in the following decades, however, this potential was lost. But far from the 'centre', not hampered by the presence of these commercialised forms,

5.
'Triptychs', unpublished note, 1985

Dreams of Europe I, II, III
1984-1985, charcoal on paper, 100 x 73 cm each

Kentridge was able to reinvest these techniques with new possibilities. While most animation is made as a succession of static images, drawn on transparent celluloid and placed on a fixed background, Kentridge's characters and backgrounds are integrated on the same sheet of paper. His bodies are not superimposed onto a setting, they are part of the landscape itself.

The fantastical world of animated film allows a sort of suspension of disbelief in viewing the work. It is a form that can easily shorten or extend time by the acceleration or slowing down of actions, and Kentridge uses this in different ways. A procession of workers, for example, fills the landscape in an impossibly short time, whilst the blinking of a character's eyes may endure for several moments. Animation allows Kentridge to explore the transformation of things: a phone turning into a cat, water filling a room, buildings crumbling. On the other hand, because it is harder to move around an object than in live-action film, Kentridge usually presents scenes frontally. More often than not, the camera is fixed to a certain spot, and only occasionally will he move it nearer to the drawing to get a close-up view, or to follow the movement of a detail like the mine shaft in *Mine*. Paradoxically, when Kentridge emulates the conventions of film he does so in the drawings themselves rather than in the way in which he films them (he will draw a 'close-up' or a 'long-shot' of a scene in preference to moving the camera). In *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old*, he draws a view of a building as if it were framed and filmed from below, looking upwards, a technique typical of Expressionist film.

The drawings are also influenced by the techniques of film montage. Sequences are selected and combined, cut and edited so that relationships are made by the viewer, and narrative is suggested by juxtaposing a rapid succession of sequences. Especially in the more recent films, the discourse does not necessarily flow according to chronological time. Sometimes, editing is fluid, at others, jump-cuts occur. Often, as when Kentridge alternates between Felix and Soho in the early films, or between perception and memory, reality and dream in the later ones, he shifts repeatedly between parallel scenes.

Animated drawings are also used as backdrops in the theatre productions that Kentridge has made in collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company. The first of these, *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992), is a multi-media version of Georg Büchner's 19th-century play *Woyzeck*. Transposing this story of a soldier who kills the woman he loves in a fit of jealous rage to the South African context, it explores the economic, social and personal pressures that push people to extreme acts of violence. The Handspring Puppet Company, directed by Basil Jones and Adrian Kohler, the creator of the carved puppets, was initially founded in 1981 as a puppet theatre for children. In 1989 they experimented with life-size puppets and created, in collaboration with the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, an apocalyptic vision of South Africa entitled *Tooth and Nail*, directed by Malcolm Purkey.

Together with Kentridge, as director and creator of animation, Handspring have made a series of unique performances including *Faustus in Africa!* (1995) and *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997). These combine on-stage actors/puppeteers, roughly-carved, raw wood puppets or shadow puppets in ink on acetate, with projected film animation, which acts both as the scenery and as a visualisation of the thoughts of the various characters. The productions are characterised by the interrelationship and complex layering of different types of representation and narration: projected images, actors and puppets are all on stage at once and the audience is constantly shifting its attention between them. In this complex experience of different personae, the subject is not univocal or clear, but multiple, shifting. The puppets act like masks worn by the actors, and we project onto them, perceiving them as real, until, suddenly aware of the puppet handler, we snap back into an acknowledgement of the fiction. Sources for these hybrid productions are to be found in the history of English puppet theatre; in Japanese Bunraku; in the pre-colonial tradition of African puppet theatre, which joins oral story-telling with music, dance

and sculpture; and even in education (puppets are used by the Venda as teaching tools).

Even after having broadened his practice into film, installation and theatre, Kentridge continues to conceive works as extended drawings – a pragmatic and practical form for unselfconsciously jotting down one's ideas and experiences. Drawings can mutate and fluctuate; they can change by erasure and addition. They are an ideal medium for acting and reacting, moving back and forth between the making of spontaneous marks on the paper, and thought. They are also simple to transport, do not cost much to make, and, like prints, are easier to disseminate and communicate than oil paintings, sculpture or installation. Drawing is therefore an ideal medium for an artist working on the periphery of the art world.

As Okwui Enwezor states, '[The] tug of war between what is popular and widely available and what is unique and limited in distribution, has elicited varied responses from artists over the centuries. The woodcut and the printing press, followed by etching, lithography, photography, film and digital imagery, are all techniques of mass reproduction and dissemination that artists – particularly African artists – though still committed to the traditions of the unique, original work of art, have found to be an important means of reaching a wider public'.[6] Printmaking, which came to the fore in South Africa in the 1970s,[7] has had a steady history there since the 1950s when the artist Katrine Harries taught it in Cape Town, promoting black-and-white etching and lithography in the making of books or portfolios. Artists such as John Muafangejo made linocuts that bridged socio-political commentary and religious story-telling in serial, narrative prints.

Kentridge has consistently studied drawings and prints by past artists. These include Goya's *Disasters of War* and Hogarth's satires, to which he dedicated the portfolio of eight etchings *Industry and Idleness,* shown in 1987 as part of a collaborative project 'Three Hogarth Satires', with artists Deborah Bell and Robert Hodgins. Kentridge has worked with Bell and Hodgins on several occasions since then: on the etching project *Little Morals* (1991); the computer animation and print project *Easing the Passing (of the Hours)* (1992-93), inspired by a phrase from Jorge Luis Borges; on the film with actors and drawings *Memo* (1993-94); and, under the initial impulse of Hodgins, on a series of etchings inspired by Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* (1888) entitled *Ubu Tells the Truth,* made in 1996.

Jarry's satire about an insane despot, grotesquely abusing his arbitrary power has provided a metaphor for several South African artists working in the wake of apartheid. Kentridge's etchings, which layer Jarry's drawings of Ubu with his own contrasting studies of a naked man, suggest both that a number of disjunctive selves can coexist within the same person and imply that there is an Ubu inside us all. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was set up in 1996, is a series of on-going hearings at which public testimony of atrocities committed during apartheid is given by victims or witnesses seeking redress, as well as by perpetrators of abuses who confess their deeds in exchange for amnesty. Publicly screened on television in South Africa, the hearings are intended to contribute to a healing process and create a context for national reconciliation. By combining the Ubu theme with the meaning and implications of the TRC, Kentridge would develop in 1997 some of his most intense work around this theme: the film and video collage also called *Ubu Tells the Truth,* and the theatre production *Ubu and the Truth Commission,* a collaboration with

Francisco de Goya, etching from series *Los desastres de la guerra* 1810 - 1820 (first published 1863)

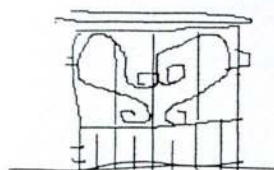
6. Okwui Enwezor, 'Neglected Artform or Poor Relation? The Importance of Printmaking in Africa' in Kendell Geers, ed, *Contemporary South African Art. The Gencor Collection*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 1997, pp.70-71

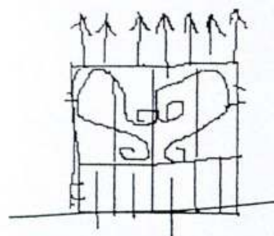
7. For an overview of printmaking in South Africa, see Philippa Hobbs & Elizabeth Rankin, *Printmaking in a Transforming South Africa*, David Philip, Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1997

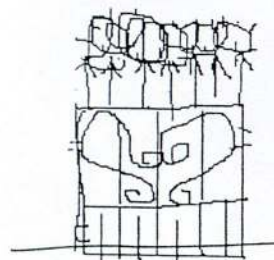
8.
Okwui Enwezor, 'Reframing the Black Subject', *Third Text*, no.40, London, Autumn 1997, p.25

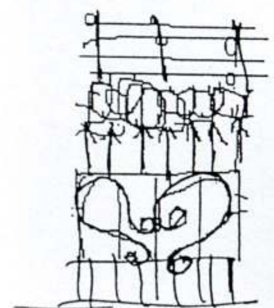
Handspring Puppet Company of Johannesburg and South African writer Jane Taylor.

Kentridge does not fetishise authorship, nor glorify notions of formal and stylistic quality in art. He finds collaboration with other artists rewarding precisely because he values content and dialogue over predefined form, ethics over 'the artist's touch'. His way of working with others recalls a musician's jam session, or community-oriented political and oppositional art, or the workshop theatre that emerges in contexts of social conflict through groups such as Junction Avenue Theatre Company. Collaboration provides a way of going beyond the 'aura' of the unique artwork without recourse to the censoring of manual art practice – the attempt to eliminate all form of subjective presence carried out by many recent artists in response to the authoritarian and reactionary nature of neo-Expressionist art. Another way to achieve this objective is to conceive the drawing as a sketch for something else, such as an animated film (an 'applied' drawing, as Kentridge himself has called his works, alluding to 'applied' versus 'pure' science). Focus shifts away from the drawing itself towards the advancement of the film, and preciousness of authorship is kept in check.









Computer mouse drawings, sketches for *Memory and Geography*, multi-media project made in collaboration with Doris Bloom, Rome 1995

Memory and Geography (1995) was a collaboration with the Danish artist Doris Bloom. Conceived as a series of different works, it included an enormous, white-chalk, diagrammatic line drawing of a heart in the barren landscape, to be imagined as if seen from above. This recalled the ancient rock drawings of South Africa, the country's earliest known artistic productions, images engraved and painted on stone surfaces some 30,000 years ago. Kentridge and Bloom did not modify the landscape like many Land artists of the 1960s. They used it as a sheet of drawing paper onto which the white design of the heart functions like a gigantic emblem, a constellation projected from the sky onto the ground. By overlaying this anatomical drawing on the landscape, a metaphor is set up between the land and the body, a theme that recurs again and again in Kentridge's animations. As part of the same project, the artists drew a gigantic utopian gate on the ground in front of the power plant in Newtown Johannesburg, which was then set alight.

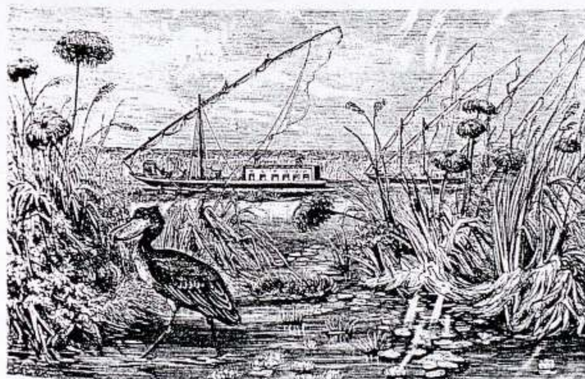
Kentridge's naturally sceptical outlook questions the optimism that harbours the ideal of a 'Rainbow Nation' capable of harmoniously joining many diversities in a new, post-nationalist country. His most recent film, *WEIGHING...and WANTING* (1998), far from presenting a hopeful picture of the current situation, thematises insecurity, the precarious and fragile nature of all forms of psychic, domestic or social harmony, as well as the endemic nature of conflict. In Okwui Enwezor's words: 'African subjectivity and white interests seem to intersect in the contest for the meaning of identity in post-apartheid South Africa. It appears that the struggle for this meaning hinges on who controls the representational intentionality of the body politic, especially its archive of images: symbolic and literal.'[8] In this context, Kentridge seems to adopt the only viable position: a retreat from the contest over which images should represent the new, decolonised South Africa, focusing instead on the intimate mechanisms of individual anamnesis, remembering one's past illnesses, one's indirect responsibility for the brutal conditions of apartheid, in a process of personal healing that must precede and may lead by extension to broader changes in society.

The official, colonial, 'white history' of modern art in South Africa begins in 1871 with the exhibitions in Cape Town organised by the South African Fine Arts Association. This group of artists was a conservative, academic off-shoot of waning European traditions, far from the new trends, such as Impressionism, that had emerged in Europe. Ironically, while European artists were looking at African art as a source material through which to develop an art of essences, to break with the tradition of European Realism, white South African artists were dismissing the cultural traditions of Africa as 'primitive' curiosities. The earliest colonial painters were illustrators, catering to European audiences with scenic paintings of a distant and exotic place. These images, along with prints from the colonial period commonly found in Europe in the 19th century, form the basis of Kentridge's *Colonial Landscapes* (1995-96). In these charcoal drawings on paper of a lush and bountiful imaginary African landscape, red pastel surveyors' marks indicate how such landscapes were more projections of, and onto, the land than accurate depictions.

« These drawings came from the work I had been doing on *Faustus in Africa!* The source was a 19th-century volume of the diaries of 'African explorers', illustrated with engravings of the exotic other the travellers were passing through. Part of the pleasure of doing the drawings was working with the 'code' of engraved marks, and playing with the mediations from the raw veld, to the sketchbook of the traveller, back to London to the professional engraving shop where the view would be re-dramatised, and engraved, to a hundred years on, looking at these now yellowing pages. The new red marks are both beacons erected in the landscape and the surveyor's theodolite markings of the image in a viewfinder. »[9]

« There is a sense of drawing a social or historical landscape. The process of actually making the drawing finds that history because the landscape itself hides it. »

9. Statement on *Colonial Landscapes*, 1996, published in leaflets for Annandale Gallery, Sydney, 1996 and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 1997



The Murchison Fall and *Arrival at the Stoppage*, loose pages from 19th-century traveller's book, collection of the artist

10.
Esmé Berman, *Painting in South Africa*, Southern Book Publishers, South Africa, 1993, p.xix

11.
Jane Taylor, *Colours: Kunst Aus Sudafrika*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 1996, (catalogue) n.p. (English translation from original author's ms)

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, artists such as Jan Ernst Abraham Volschenk (1853-1936) celebrated a green countryside of pastures and glens. They depicted broad, open spaces in the tradition of Romanticism and European landscape painting, showing little or no interest in depicting the human condition or the history of colonisation embedded within the landscape. This reflects the colonial vision of white South Africans prior to urbanisation, 'accustomed to space and elbow-room... traditional votaries of the freedom of the great sunlit outdoors'.[10] The landscapes that appear in Kentridge's works question these earlier depictions, exposing the fallacy of a romantic ideal of pure, unadulterated 'nature' in an area of Africa where the terrain has been ecologically disrupted and abused by the growth of mining plants. He counters these Arcadian views with the reality of a barren landscape ridden with mining and civil engineering detritus, elements that represent the fact of human passage and are historical traces of the history of South Africa. The landscape appears like a 'drawn' scene or an imperfectly erased 'text' to be recovered and 'read' through. Furthermore, he contradicts the ideal of the empty landscape, by populating his barren wastelands of abandoned machinery and billboards with processions of labourers, thereby rendering 'visible' the erased and segregated population.

The land is also used as a metaphor for the body and vice versa. In *WEIGHING...and WANTING* for example, physical abuse is associated with the disruption of the landscape when the charcoal marks indicating lacerations on the back of a naked woman are transformed into parts of a civil engineering structure sited in a mining area. 'Bodies, in South Africa, are marked spatially: the dream of the apartheid map was to fix racial identities within designated geographic spaces: "Separate Development"... Ultimately, much of the ideological work of apartheid was to misrepresent the movement of persons back and forth, and to create the phantom that "peoples" had been fixed into given places, that somehow they belonged there for reasons of ethnic affiliation.'[11]

During the 20th century, African artists have operated in various directions, developing sources as varied as Abstract Expressionism, lyrical abstraction, academic landscape painting, Surrealism, or working with popular sign painting, neo-Primitivism and Social Realism. Kentridge's Expressionism, however, seems to be peculiar to South Africa. Contemporary artists there who make direct references to it are developing a tradition that began with the work of Maggie Laubser and Irma Stern in the 1930s and 40s. Stern studied in Germany in the pre-war era, bringing back the legacy of Expressionism in an art of visual images distorted by subjective feelings, which she combined with a knowledge of Munch and African tribal sculpture. Similarly, Wolf Kibel (1903-1938), an Eastern European painter who emigrated to South Africa, brought information about Soutine and Chagall, and developed a raw style of sketchy, unsure contours. Kentridge would develop these Expressionist sources but never conceded to the sensuous delight in colour of the earlier white South African painters, preferring the dark tones of charcoal.

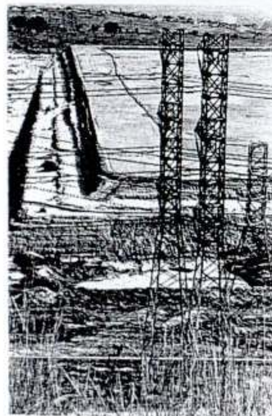
Kentridge's grounding of his work in narrative, which essentially began with his first animated film about Soho Eckstein/Felix Teitlebaum in 1989, also draws on sources from black African, and particularly, South African, art. There may well be an indirect relationship between this approach and the tradition of oral story-telling in Africa, or the poetic narration of legends and

Mine-dump near Germiston, photo William Kentridge

South Africa Landscape

Gerald Sekoto, *Street Scene*, 1947-1950, oil on canvas, 46 x 54 cm, Pretoria Art Museum

Dumile, *Fear* 1966, charcoal on paper, 134.5 x 79 cm, Pretoria Art Museum



histories by the griot. The oil and gouache scenes of Gerald Sekoto (1913-1993) show dusty streets, backyards, ramshackle houses and people engaged in the various activities of daily life in Sophiatown (a settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg, bulldozed in 1955 in accordance with apartheid directives, its inhabitants dispersed into different ethnic communities of the Soweto conglomerate). These unpretentious images, with their simple, almost cartoon-like depictions of urban slum dwellers, their celebration of the life of the disadvantaged, find echoes in Kentridge's drawings. Sekoto left for Paris in 1947 and spent the rest of his life in exile. His work was generally reappraised in South Africa in the late 1980s.

During the 1960s, a black urban art centring on scenes of township life emerged. Initially growing out of the Polly Street Art Centre under the impulse of Cecil Skotnes, it became known as Township Art. In part, this work was connected with the emergence of independence movements and the global breakdown of colonial power. More importantly, however, it reflected the demands of the South African art market, which would accept nothing but these township scenes (mainly watercolours, drawings and prints) from black artists. However, the art of Dumile (Mslaba Zwelidumile Fene, 1942-1991) stands apart. At a time when European and American artists were involved in Pop Art, Minimalism, Land Art, post-Minimalism and Conceptual Art, he was expanding the Expressionist and Realist tradition. He created ink, crayon and charcoal works on paper within the framework of the Black Consciousness movement as it developed through close relationships between writers, political activists such as Steve Biko and artists in the United States and South Africa. He finally emigrated to the USA in 1968.

« As a teenager I went to Bill Ainslie's studio for art lessons two evenings a week. He was a very important figure in the Johannesburg art world of the 1960s and 1970s as a teacher. He gave considerable support to black artists who later became significant, particularly Dumile. Dumile made remarkably strong, demonic drawings, either in ballpoint pen on a small scale, or in charcoal on a large scale. That was the first time that I understood the power of figurative, large-scale charcoal drawings – that they could be so striking. I saw him working at Bill Ainslie's studio, and he had the capacity to express things on a scale that I thought drawings could not achieve. He is the key local artist who influenced me. »

Also during this period, the UN censored South Africa and in 1974 voted to suspend the country's membership. The Sharpville massacre of 1960 followed demonstrations against pass laws, leaving 69 dead and 180 wounded. This triggered repugnance for apartheid around the world. Photographs of the massacred bodies, lying bleeding on the ground, form part of the source material for *Felix in Exile* (1994), combined with art historical reference to Goya's *3rd of May 1808* (1814).

« A friend who was making a documentary on the history of Soweto told me he'd come across some extraordinary police photographs of people who'd been murdered or shot, lying in the veld. Without seeing these photographs, the idea of these images of people lying dead in the veld forced themselves on me as something that could be drawn. When I actually saw the photos themselves, they were very different from how I imagined them. There were people in corridors, people lying in small spaces. In fact, none of them were out in the veld. If I had actually seen the photographs first, I probably would not have made this connection with people lying out in the landscape. When I actually started making *Felix in Exile*, I began with these bodies lying out in the veld. And they were extraordinary photos – drawing them was an important process. The images I was shown were terrifying and impossible to look at, but the moment I started drawing them, a different process happened, in terms of what it meant to look at them. What became interesting was the way in which making drawings of the images, the activity of drawing, in a way tamed the images, made them manageable, made the events they were describing graspable. Drawing something is a way of controlling it – not in real life, but in the life of one's head. One photo came from the massacre outside Sharpville. At the time, I was six years old and my father was one of the lawyers for the families of the people who had been killed. I remember coming once into his study and seeing on his desk a large, flat, yellow Kodak box, and lifting the lid off of it – it looked like a chocolate box. Inside were images of a woman with her back blown off, someone with only half her head visible. The impact of seeing these images for the first time – when I was six years old – the shock – was extraordinary. I understood that the world was not how I had imagined it at all, that things happened in the world that were inconceivable. So I would say that although when I was drawing the bodies for *Felix in Exile* I did not have the Sharpville massacre in mind – this was only a connection I made some months or years later – I'm sure that, in a sense, it was trying to tame that horror of seeing those images. In the

Detail from Francisco de Goya, *Tres de Mayo* 1814, oil on canvas, 268 x 347 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid

Archive photos of Soweto uprising, 1976

Casspirs Full of Love 1989, copper drypoint, 163 x 88 cm

same way, when I was four or five, I had been driving in a car with my grandfather, and out of the side window I saw two men kicking a third man on the edge of the road, which was also, for me, a shocking image of violence. I mention it because that image comes into *History of the Main Complaint*. To go back to the drawings of the bodies: there's obviously the reference to Sharpville, but the actual images that I chose to draw – because I drew maybe only eight out of hundreds of photos – were very close to images I'd seen in classical and Renaissance paintings. One of them reminded me of a figure in Goya's *3rd of May 1808*, of a person lying on the ground. Another, of a person shot in 1992, I recognised today at Brera, in the Mantegna painting of the foreshortened *Dead Christ*. I realised that this was what made me choose that image. »[12]

In 1974, the leadership of BPC (Black People's Convention), the political movement in which Biko was a key figure, was tried under the Terrorism act, for fomenting student unrest. In June 1976, riots broke out in Soweto and in the townships, sparked by protest against the forced use of Afrikaans rather than English in schools. More than 700 people were killed before the end of the riots. Biko was arrested and died in jail while in the custody of the security police the following year.

The progressive international isolation of South African artists in the 1970s, due to the political boycott of their country, meant that they could not exhibit in international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale. Some responded with a sense of common purpose and engagement. Dumile's portrayal of poverty, brutality and fear in the townships, had preceded by ten to fifteen years an Expressionist style that was to characterise a branch of South African Resistance Art. This term was coined following the Soweto uprising to refer to art politically engaged in the fight against apartheid. Artists, both white and black, including Kentridge and Cyprian ShilaKoé, adopted this style in their vivid denunciations of apartheid society.

The 1980s were characterised by violence and a state of near war with vigilante squads and Casspirs (riot-control vehicles to which Kentridge has dedicated a series of ironic works called *Casspirs Full of Love*). Rubber bullets, water cannons and sharp ammunition were fired against demonstrators. The first State of Emergency was declared in 1985. Young people in the townships created open-air assemblages or 'peace parks', naming them after leaders such as Nelson Mandela. These were destroyed by police forces.

A number of South African artists went into voluntary exile. Some of those who stayed developed forms of Protest art, and there was a tendency towards co-operative community expression and collaborative projects across art forms. A key venue for these events was The Market Theatre complex in Johannesburg, with its annex, The Market Gallery, which had opened

12. Lecture, Triennale, Milan, 19 November 1997, published in *Facts and Fiction*, ed R. Pinto, Comune di Milano, Milan, 1998

in 1976, and where Kentridge took part in both plays and exhibitions. Art shows such as 'The Neglected Tradition' (1988), curated by Steven Sack, suggested a new history of South African art by reviewing the contribution of black artists since 1930. 'Tributaries' (1985) questioned the boundaries and significance of modernist art, and included works by black rural artists such as Nelson Mukhuba, who combined traditional carving and clay modelling with material products of contemporary urban culture. The need to address issues of cultural diversity, both in exhibition-making and in postmodernist theory, came to the forefront in South Africa, as in the international art arena, by the end of the 1980s. Also at this time the Western notion of 'Fine Arts', central since the Renaissance, was extended in a review of the distinction between Fine Arts and other cultural production, which up to then had been referred to as 'craft' or 'minor arts'.

Following on from this development, in 1991 the Cape Town Triennale exhibition introduced new categories, distinct from painting, drawing and sculpture, in an attempt to include craft-based forms such as beadwork. As a result of this, Kentridge submitted his animated film *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old*, which subsequently won an award.

> « I had submitted my film to test their boundaries. If beadwork was acceptable, why not film work? A number of the submitting artists were offended by the inclusion of both beadwork and the film. »

When apartheid finally came to an end with the election to power of the ANC in 1994, it became necessary to constitute a new national, post-apartheid identity in a post-nationalist period, through processes of individual and collective memory, shifting from a notion of objective and linear 'history' to the pluralist possibilities of 'histories'. Art, it was felt, could play an important role in this healing process. The first Johannesburg Biennale, in 1995, curated by Lorna Ferguson, set out both to engage local constituencies in this process of identity-building, and to re-inscribe South African Art into the international art world. Kentridge's work could be interpreted as a construction of an allegory of nationhood that stages the process of remembering and recognising through the theme of healing, which occurs on the part of the artist through the experience of drawing itself, and, on the part of the viewer, through viewing the film. While Resistance Art in the 1980s had been mainly characterised by images of popular struggle and battles against apartheid forces, Kentridge's method of joining intimate stories of personal longing and desperation with broader social conflict has been constant throughout his career, even in his earlier drawings. This approach points to a more complex and personal way of representing and constructing subjectivity within the new national narrative: 'Images of individual loss, the textures of private grief, or memory, little places of intimate longing'.[13] Although Kentridge's work in theatre with the Handspring Puppet Company had been internationally renowned since the 1992 production of *Woyzeck on the Highveld*, presented at the Theater der Welt Festival, Munich and in Antwerp in 1993, it was the Johannesburg Biennial that created a first context for his appraisal by the international visual art community, and exhibitions followed in Europe, including the 'Istanbul Biennale' (1995), 'Jurassic Technologies Revenant: Biennale of Sydney' (1996), 'Campo 6, The Spiral Village' (1996), 'Città Natura' (1997), the 'Havana Biennial' (1997) and 'documenta X' (1997).

13.
Jane Taylor, *Colours: Kunst Aus Sudafrika*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 1996, (catalogue) n.p. (English translation from original author's ms)

14.
Afrikaners were Dutch, German and French colonials who reached South Africa in the 1600s. Until 1759, before British sovereignty, the territory of the Cape had been governed by the Dutch East India Company of Holland, on whose initiative the first European settlers had landed. When British rule began, the Afrikaners moved into the interior of the country, where various Boer republics were established, such as the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek in the Transvaal. Afrikaners, who were farmers, wanted to preserve the autonomy of their community from the British Empire. Diamonds were discovered in 1867, gold in the late 1800s. Wages for the Africans who mined these resources were kept to a minimum through the use of immigrant labour. Afrikaner nationalism had grown during the 19th century in the Boer Republics and was further heightened as a consequence of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) and the brutal treatment of the Afrikaners by the British. The National Party came to power with the 1948 elections. Segregation, the creation of townships and separate education programmes were officially set up to encourage a multinational state in which different ethnic groups could maintain and express their own culture autonomously. Sexual relations between racial groups were banned and whites developed a form of paternalistic racism, which was proposed as positive. African migration towards industrial areas was limited by passes and separate transport. Laws were passed to classify the population into white, coloured and indigenous.

Kentridge's technique of erasure echoes one of the strategies of racism in the Modern Age. Modernity is a two-sided coin: on the one hand, it values progress, reason and the universal values of the Enlightenment, such as democracy. On the other, it values individual (the person) and collective subjectivity (the nation). When State and Nation coincide, racism develops either on the basis of rendering the group it discriminates against inferior and 'invisible' (erased) by allocating to it the menial tasks in society (oppression), or on the basis of segregation and differentiation of a group because its cultural characteristics are perceived as dangers to the purity and integrity of the dominating group's culture (separation).

As far back as one wants to go in history, human communities have always been aggressed by others, kept at a distance or considered inferior. However, certain specific characteristics of modern racism have emanated from the body of ideas and the social and economic structures of modernity. Racist ideology is dominated by the scientific pretence of objective truth, based on the research and writings of explorers, philosophers, anatomists, physiologists, doctors, phrenologists and anthropologists, especially since the 18th century. But discrimination and violence are also modern in the sense that they are the fruits of the great changes made during the Renaissance with 'discoveries', migrations, openings of market economies, urbanisation and industrialisation of western civilisation. Through colonialism, modernity tended towards integrating peoples into its project, therefore erasing them by dissolving them into Westernised culture.

Apartheid in South Africa combined oppressive discrimination through exploitation with differentiation and separation.[14] In the post-World War II period, South African apartheid became the emblem of the continuation of racism after the Holocaust, and its intimate relationship with capitalist structures of power.

« I envy people who can get on with their work without having to bring the history of the world along with them. At some remote level it is a precondition that dogs my work. »[15]

'At a time when 9,000 Jews were being exterminated each day', wrote George Steiner in 1965, 'neither the RAF nor the US Air Force bombed the ovens or sought to blow up the camps (...) I wonder what would have happened if Hitler had played the game after Munich, if he had simply said, "I will make no move out of the Reich so long as I am allowed a free hand inside my borders". Dachau, Buchenwald and Theresienstadt would have operated in the middle of the 20th-century European civilisation until the last Jew in reach had been made soap (...) Society might, on occasion, have boycotted German wines. But no foreign power would have taken action. Tourists would have crowded the Autobahn and spas of the Reich, passing near, but not too near, the death camps as we now pass Portuguese jails or Greek prison islands (...) Men are accomplices to that which leaves them indifferent.'[16]

Kentridge's art stresses the importance of remembering and takes a stance against the risk of lapsing into amnesia and disavowal of historical memory, as well as of psychic removal, characteristic of society after traumatic events. Guilt, complicity and indirect responsibility are key themes in his art. In connection with this he portrays the intolerable position of being a survivor and a witness. In *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* Felix is a witness of protest marches; in *Felix in Exile* he watches abuses and the shooting of Nandi from his hotel room. And in *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) Soho/Felix observes violent brutality through the window of his car.

15.
From lecture, 1990

16.
George Steiner, 'A kind of Survivor – For Elie Wiesel', *Language and Silence*, Faber & Faber, London, 1979, reproduced in *After Auschwitz*, ed. M. Bohm-Duchen, Northern Centre for Contemporary Art Sunderland, Lund Humphries Publishers Limited, London 1995, p.13

Frontispiece for Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem*, Giovanni Oporino, Basel, 1555. Biblioteca Angelica, Rome

In many ways, Kentridge's themes recall the preoccupations of Holocaust survivors, just as his drawings sometimes echo those of labour camp prisoners. The hard physical toil and the notorious 'boxes' – bunk-beds stacked one above the other – depicted in *Mine* bring to mind drawings by artist prisoners in labour camps such as Henri Pieck, Auguste Favier, or Boris Taslitzky. Further associations arise through the imagery of gassing or burning: the crematorium chimney, smoke, the sombre, charcoal atmosphere. And his procession of the dispossessed suggests not individuals, but the dehumanised masses incarcerated in the camps. Yet he never adopts the extreme Expressionism of Zoran Music's skeletal corpses, hovering out of context. The Holocaust transcends its original meaning and becomes a symbol of the tragedy of modernity as a whole.

Prague, Berlin, Vienna and Paris in the 1920s were permeated with the erudite urbanity of European Jewish culture. Caught between Nazism and Stalinism, this was erased. Jews involved in the social utopia of Communism and the Russian revolution, were cast aside when Communism turned to nationalism and technocracy. Kentridge's use of erasure echoes this pitiless law of history: when beaten or shot bodies lie bleeding to death in *Felix in Exile* the landscape reabsorbs them, and little or no traces are left. When, in *WEIGHING... and WANTING*, lying in the lap of his beloved, Soho Eckstein's heart and mind become preoccupied with business, she is erased and turns into a telephone. Erasure, however, is never perfect: it leaves traces.

In 1949, Theodor Adorno stated that after Auschwitz there can be no more lyric poetry. For many reasons, Kentridge does not agree. In Europe and America, after World War II it seemed impossible to render through the mediation of language the horror of the experience, as well as ethically unjust to create an aesthetic experience out of such brutal real-life events. In the face of the nightmare of the Holocaust, witnessed directly or indirectly, through personal testimonies, documentary footage and photographs, silence and mute stupor seemed the only viable and appropriate responses. This ushered in, along with the philosophy of Existentialism, a generation of abstract artists associated with European 'art autre' or 'art informel', or American Abstract Expressionism and Action painting. The artist's gesture became synonymous with gaining a sense of absolute presence, of identification between self and world as the only tenable mode of existence. Pollock's drip paintings, Dubuffet's Art Brut, Wols' tentative and intimate marks and graffiti, or Burri's torn and sutured sacking were examples of this response to the overwhelming nature of recent historical events.

> « Alas there *is* lyric poetry. Alas, because of the dulling of sensibilities we must have in order to make that writing or reading possible. But of course, also, thank goodness that such poetry can still be read. The dulling of memory is both a failure and a blessing. »

Image of South Africa

Slimes dam outside Johannesburg, photo William Kentridge

In Western art, this attitude marked the decline of figuration and Expressionism, as well as of the satirical and oppositional art of the pre-war years. Advanced artists felt that a direct representation of concentration camp scenes – barbed wire, striped camp uniforms, brutal guards, watchtowers, etc. – ran the risk of banalising the horror into stereotypical images and spectacle, into predictable and over-explicit representations. By abstracting the representation, art, it seemed, became more universal, and therefore more true. Furthermore, figurative art was identified with pre-war 'arts of power', such as Italian Novecento, or post-war Social Realism. This rejection of figurative art was founded on a notion of authenticity and identification between signifier and signified.

A notion of authenticity, already present in post-war 'informel' abstraction, continued to be central to art throughout the 1960s in Europe and America, even in Arte Povera and Land Art, which emerged in contrast to, and as a rejection of, what appeared to be the social indifference of post-war abstraction and Abstract Expressionism. And even Pop art, which questioned the notion of avant-garde 'originality', could not adopt traditional, mimetic representation. Figuration could be used only in so far as the image was already a 'sign' in and of itself, prior to the artist's appropriation of it – as with billboards, posters and magazine advertisements. In Minimalism, Land Art and Arte Povera, representation was also rejected as inauthentic: in many cases, the site itself, *hic et nunc*, determined the artwork. In other cases, raw and found organic and inorganic materials were used by artists in lieu of representation as 'attitudes become form' (as the title of a well-known exhibition in Bern in 1969 suggested), or artists like Christo 'packaged' the real.

Conceptual art emerged out of dissatisfaction with the ability of Pop and Minimalism radically to disrupt society, and posited critical thought itself as artwork. Based on the politicised cultural critique associated with the New Left and the School of Frankfurt, it rejected the isolated, auratic art object and treated critical language in terms of its physicality, its modes of production and communication and engagement with the urban environment. However, even though much Conceptual practice was based on active political engagement, it remained the aloof product of intellectual and artistic circles, and was even co-opted by advertising and media. In some ways it failed to reach its objectives. As Jeff Wall has remarked: 'Conceptual art's feeble response to the clash of its political fantasies with the real economic conditions of the art world marks out its historical limit as critique. Its political fantasy curbs itself at the boundary of market economy'.[17]

This created a context for the questioning of the radical nature of Conceptual art by artists working on the periphery of the international art world in places where the effects of capitalism and racism on daily life were all too real. In South Africa, Kentridge perceived Conceptual art as too cryptic, over-intellectualised and removed from the reality of human suffering. In Europe, by the late 1970s, Conceptualism had reached a form of solipsistic isolation from the audience, and a sense of the collapse of its utopian avant-gardism ushered in a reactionary return to tradition and romantic forms of regressive *atelier* painting with New Painting and Neo-Expressionism in the early 1980s. Advanced and politically committed artists could not engage in this practice, which was felt to reinstate Romantic notions of authorship and heroism, beyond any sense of art's role in society. New painting was also associated with the commercialisation and institutionalisation of contemporary art during the 1980s.

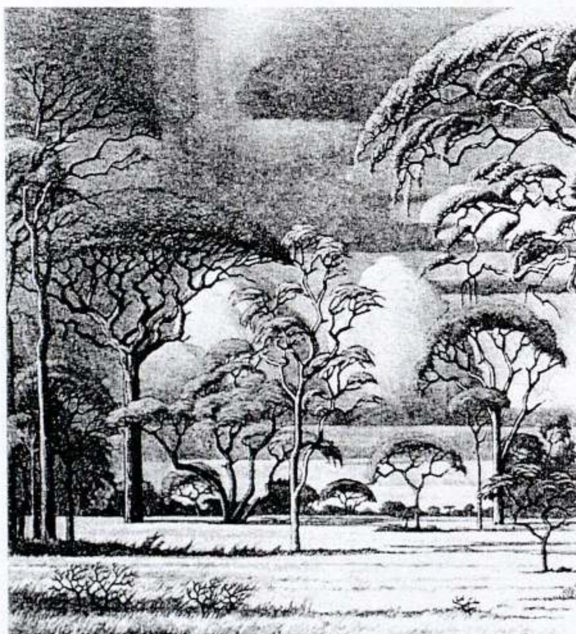
It is perhaps precisely because Kentridge's art developed at a distance from Europe and these debates during the late 1970s and 1980s – far from Kiefer and Baselitz – that he was able to take a fresh look at the progressive and socially critical tradition of pre-war Expressionism and figuration. He could therefore question both the anti-iconic nature of modernist, avant-garde abstract art, as well as the Conceptual legacy of the School of Frankfurt. Yet his work is not a nostalgic and reactionary return to figuration because the

17. Jeff Wall, 'Dan Graham's Kammerspiel', *Art Metropole*, 1991, pp.16.

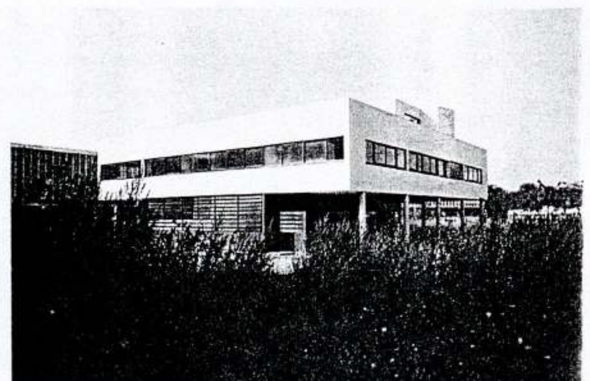
romantic (and 'phallic') element is absent: humour, a sense of process, poor materials such as charcoal and paper, the provisional nature of each image keep those neo-Expressionist elements at bay.

Kentridge addresses uncertainty and process because they allow the Self to approach the world with humility and openness to change, rather than with preconceptions and authority. He is able to avoid the central, authoritarian modern gaze – the panoptikon – by splitting the Self into many different voices and identities: Soho, Felix, Nandi, Harry, etc. Like his undefined drawing style, these selves are never fixed, but constantly shifting, splitting, condensing and dividing. His questioning of authority runs parallel to his doubts about modernity as a whole. Modernity is the culture of progress and the Enlightenment, but also of colonialism and industrialisation, of idealism and historicism, as well as of scientific thought. His oblique criticism of South African landscape painting by Pretoria artist Jacob Hendrik Pierneef (1886-1957) goes beyond a question of subject matter. His attitude towards the artistic act of representation itself is at odds with Pierneef's vision that beauty and harmony are responsive to mathematical laws. Pierneef's paintings were based on strong, authoritative measurements of space and his compositions were an integrated system of related, regular forms, partly recalling Mondrian, partly Art Deco geometrical stylisation of organic shapes. Paintings such as *Bushveld Game Reserve* (1951) represent a frozen, clean, inhuman landscape, in which time is suspended. Kentridge's *horror vacui* early drawings are messy, dynamic and filled with the drama of humanity.

The modernist dream, as represented through functional architecture, is also re-coded by Kentridge: Soho's 'home' in *WEIGHING... and WANTING* (1998), and Ulisse's palace in *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse* (1998), stem from a house in Sergei Eisenstein's film *The General Line* (1928). These images evoke Le Corbusier's utopia, but also the lost dream of modernism in contemporary suburban architecture.



J.H. Pierneef, *Bushveld, Game Reserve* 1951, detail, oil, 65 x 85 cm, private collection

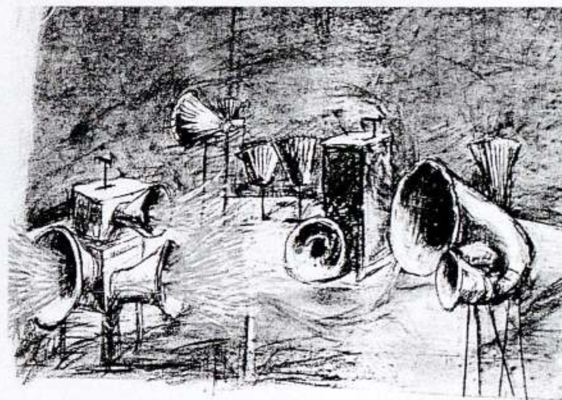


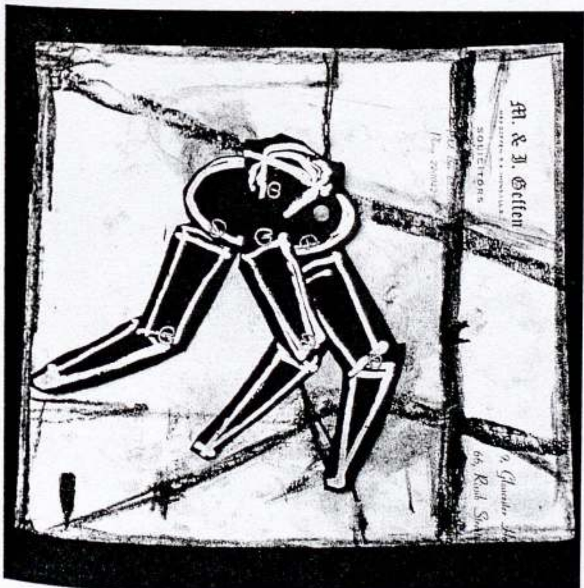
Le Corbusier, *Villa Savoie*, Poissy, 1928-31

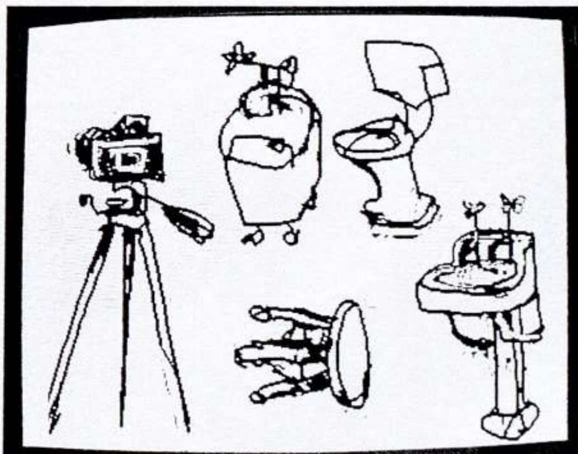
V OBLIQUE VIEW:
INDIRECTION, MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

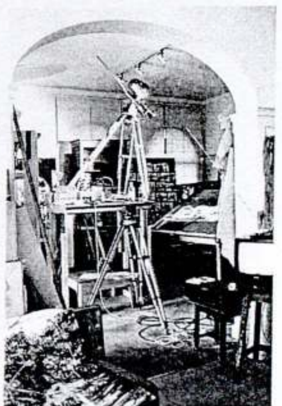
Whether in his recent theatrical productions or in his early drawings, Kentridge rarely offers the viewer the fantasy of a direct gaze onto the world, and the mechanism of vision itself is a theme in his work. In the films, the camera eye and tripod constitute an ambiguous image: it is both the emblem of surveillance, a central, hierarchical and controlling eye, and the artist's gaze, which allows his drawings and films to be made.

Kentridge stages indirect, oblique views that underline the way in which knowledge is negotiated between experience and memory, as well as mediated through communication systems and cultural stereotypes. He often suggests how in life we are subject to the power of the media, how we willingly accept the filters that distance us from a reality we do not want to see, devices that psychically smooth away the crudeness of that reality. The drawings and projected films are filled with images of billboards, which are drawn in the urban landscape – pictures within the picture itself. The theatre productions juxtapose and layer puppets, actors and backdrop projection, causing the audience to shift continuously between different registers of viewing and interpreting the relationship between signifier and signified. In *Felix in Exile* we do not see Nandi directly, but through Felix's memory of her, and even her drawings are viewed through his eyes as he looks through a pile of them in a suitcase. Similarly, the African landscape and the bodies of felled protesters are seen only through Nandi's theodolite, framed by her red contours and marks on the land/paper. In *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), when Soho is ill in hospital, we are granted a view into his body only through picture imaging techniques such as CAT scans and X-rays. As we penetrate his anatomy by way of this mediation – as participants in the doctors'









Rehearsal *Ubu and the Truth Commission* 1997

Drawing from *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* 1991, charcoal and pastel on paper, 75 x 120 cm

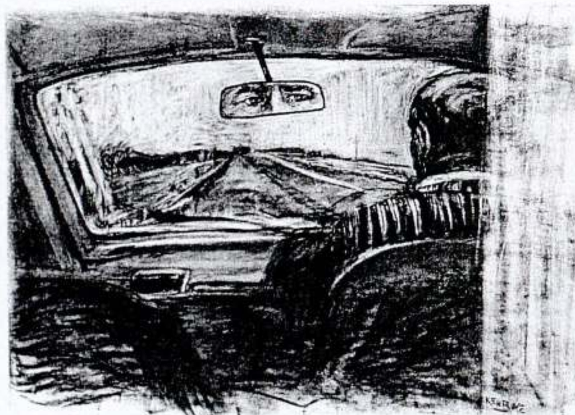
Drawing for animation from *Ubu Tells the Truth* 1997

Computer drawing

William Kentridge's studio, with camera

examination – we see internalised signs of his past emerging in the form of telephones and other office tools. Parallel to this, he remembers scenes of roadside beatings to which we are introduced obliquely, through fragments of his partially erased experiences. But the original experiences were already filtered and indirect, witnessed through the windshield of his car: the viewer therefore perceives them doubly mediated. Our obscene gaze is reversed and sent back to us by the eyes of Felix/Soho disquietingly reflected back at us from the rear-view mirror, implicating us through this mirroring in an awareness of possible indirect responsibility.

This oblique and multiple gaze recalls the interrogative, open and non-prescriptive film-making referred to by Trinh T. Min-Ha in 1992: 'More and more, there is a need to make films politically (as differentiated from making political films. (...) the making itself is political (...) A responsible work today seems to me, above all, to be one that shows, on the one hand, a political commitment and an ideological lucidity, and is, on the other hand, interrogative by nature, instead of being merely prescriptive. In other words, a work that involves her story in history; a work that acknowledges the difference between lived experience and representation (...) To work against this levelling of differences is also to resist the very notion of difference, which, defined in the Master's terms always resorts to the simplicity of essences.'[18] Although Kentridge does not claim to make films 'politically', he does recognise that making them with a sense of how they can reflect the ways in which we construct meaning for ourselves can have an implicit, political polemic.



Kentridge's works are narrative in that they suggest a story, even if it is compressed into a single drawing or scene. But the films progress through juxtapositions and cuts between separate scenes, taking on a visionary, dreamy quality, so that no definitive story ever emerges, and the indistinct space between the experience of reality and the experience of the mind is evoked. Mechanisms of condensation and distortion are introduced. There is no linear, temporal progression in the films, and time is especially fractured in the more recent works, where the uneven and subjective perception of duration is evoked – some moments moving faster than real time, others expanding the experience of an instant. Past and present, reality and fiction continuously shift and blend. Like processes of personal memory, the films are disordered: elements are selected, combined, replicated and deleted. They evoke the fact that it is impossible to remember everything, but it is equally impossible totally to forget. And in order to remember, one must be able to forget. By allowing traces of imperfect erasure to remain visible in the images, time is amplified; 'before' and 'now' overlap and subjectivity is experienced as a passage, hovering in a zone between forgetting and recalling.

While staging very personal investigations, the films explore a border zone where Self/Other are not distinguished or defined as opposites. They recall the notion of the psychoanalyst, artist and feminist theorist Bracha Lichtenberg of a 'matrixial gaze' stemming from a notion of feminine prenatal relationship to the world not based on opposition but on the possibility of surpassing borderlines and definitions in a process of continuous metmorphosis and transformation.[19]

Both in terms of style and content, Kentridge's art denies coherence, clarity, static definition, separation between past and present, self and other, stability and universalism, and in so doing creates an art of 'resistance' to modernism *and*

18.
Trinh T. Min-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, Routledge, New York/London, 1992, pp.147-152

19.
'Matrix is an unconscious borderspace of simultaneous co-emergence and co-fading of the *I* and uncognized *non-I* neither fused nor rejected, which share and transmit joint, hybrid and diffracted objects via conductible borderlinks. Matrix is a model of a feminine/prenatal rapport conceived of as a shared psychic borderspace in which *differentiation-in-co-emergence* and *distance-in-proximity* are continuously reattuned by metamorphosis created by, and further creating – accompanied by matrixial affects – *relations-without-relating* on the borders of presence and absence, subject and object, me and the stranger (...) In a joint and multiple marginal trans-individual awareness, perceived boundaries dissolve into becoming new boundaries; forms are transgressed; borderlines surpassed and transformed into becoming thresholds (...) Contingent transgressive borderlinks and a borderspace of swerve and encounter emerge as a sex-difference and a creative instance which engrave traces that may be revealed/invented in *withness*-in-differentiation. In the matrix, rapport-without-relating transforms the unknown other and me and turns both of us into partial subjects – still unknown to each other – in subjectivity-as-encounter. Metamorphosis is a co-poïetic activity in an inter-psychic web that remembers, conducts, transfers and inscribes feminine jouissance, swerve and rapport. Via art the effects of the borderlink's activity are transmitted into the threshold of culture' (Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, 'Trans-subjective Transferential Borderspace' in *Doctor and Patient – Memory and Amnesia*, ed Marketta Seppäla, Pori ArtMuseum, Pori, 1996, pp.69-70)

postmodernism. In the same way, his work loses all form of racial (or gender) distinction: it is neither 'black' nor 'white', but simply 'African'. It is an art from a border zone where both 'Europeanness' and 'Negritude' are seen as nostalgic utopias. It explores neither the 'private' dimension of memory nor the 'collective' one of mythology or history. In some ways it is a 'domestic' art, born on the periphery, and grounded in the locality of Johannesburg, refuting emulation of the product of a distant 'centre'. It is an art 'amazed' by the fact that, despite these characteristics, it has managed to reach into parts of the centre it assumed it could not hope to penetrate.

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Drawing from *History of the Main Complaint* 1996, charcoal on paper, 120 x 160 cm

Johannesburg skyline