

Film projections, animation, opera,
painting, sculpture, texts: the South
African artist William Kentridge's works
are as political as they are poetic. On the
eve of his major UK show, *Hedley Twidle*
visited him in his Johannesburg studio.

Portrait by *Zanele Muholi*

THE MASTER IN HIS UNIVERSE



I knew I was at the right place because of the cats. Two sculpted, spiky creatures faced each other atop the gates in Houghton, one of Johannesburg's wealthy, jacaranda-shrouded suburbs. I recognised them from drawings, etchings and films – in which cats emerge from radios (“Ubu Tells the Truth”), curl into bombs (“Stereoscope”), turn into espresso pots (“Lexicon”). Now they had become metal, swinging open to reveal a steep driveway and above it a brick and glass building perched on stilts amid foliage: the studio. A gardener directed me past some cycads to the right entrance and there an assistant ushered me in to meet William Kentridge. He was wearing a blue rather than a white collared shirt but in all other aspects conformed to his self-appointed uniform: black trousers, black shoes, the string of a pince-nez knotted through a buttonhole, the lenses stowed in a breast pocket when they were not on his nose.

When William Kentridge arrives in one of the big world capitals these days, he arrives in force. In 2010 he took Manhattan, with a retrospective at MoMA and a staging of Shostakovich's *The Nose* at the Metropolitan Opera. Since then: Berlin, Beijing, Rio, Oaxaca, Mumbai, Milan, Moscow (to name just a few). Earlier this year, a 550m frieze of enormous figures stencilled along the Tiber's embankment in Rome – his largest public artwork to date. And now London: a major exhibition titled *Thick Time* at the Whitechapel Gallery that opens later this month, and will coincide with his production of Alban Berg's *Lulu* at English National Opera in November.

Compatriots, fellow Johannesburgers – we have watched with pleasure and perhaps pleasant surprise just how big WK has made it in the art world. The surprise comes partly from how he has managed to become genuinely global by remaining unashamedly local. Dürer, Hogarth and Daumier; the whole intellectual apparatus of the Enlightenment; the art of the Russian Revolution and other failed utopias of the 20th century; far-reaching mediations into the nature of space and time – all of the above have been filtered through the singularity of his Jo'burg. Or even more specifically, the 3km radius that comprises Kentridge's home, the schools he went to, the university of Witwatersrand where he took a degree in politics and African Studies, the Market Gallery where he first started exhibiting in the late 1970s, the Junction Avenue Theatre Company, for which he wrote, acted and directed.

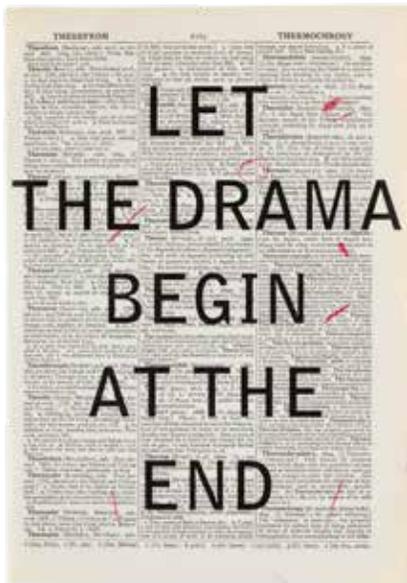
As part of a multiracial community of artists trying to find a way of working through the worst days of the Nationalist regime, Kentridge has spoken of the challenge of addressing “the immovable rock of apartheid” without being limited or fixated by it. To escape the rock, he wrote in 1990, was the great challenge ▶



THE REFUSAL OF TIME WITH COLLABORATION OF PHILIP MILLER, CATHERINE MEYBURGH AND PETER GALISON. FILM STILL, 2012. 5-CHANNEL VIDEO PROJECTION. COLOUR, SOUND, MEGAPHONES, BREATHING MACHINE, 30 MINUTES. KUNIHRO SHIKATA, COURTESY OF PARASOPHIA OFFICE ©WILLIAM KENTRIDGE



Above: installation view "The Refusal of Time", The Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, Beijing, 2015



Stills from "Second-hand Reading", flipbook film, 2013



"7 Fragments for Georges Méliès, Day for Night and Journey to the Moon", 2013



Above: installation view, "The Refusal of Time" (images 1 & 2), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2013

◀ for the artist in those days, for "the rock is possessive, and inimical to good work": "You cannot face the rock head-on; the rock always wins."

The way Kentridge managed to escape without being escapist – to evolve an artistic language that is private and playful while also saturated with the political – is the continual surprise of his oeuvre. The range and ambition of his subject matter have kept pace with his growing renown, so that a cacophonous, large-scale work such as "The Refusal of Time", which will be the centrepiece of the Whitechapel show, takes on planet-scale questions of modernity and measurement. Beginning with the tick of a metronome, it builds to a swirling carousel of music, text fragments, drawings and filmed actors, pivoting around a moment in history when clock time was standardised, and the world became, in the artist's words, "a huge dented bird cage of time zones, of lines of agreement and control".

LONDON, as one of his early prints reminds us, IS A SUBURB OF JOHANNESBURG. And there is something undaunted and curiously free in the way he provincialises Europe, rummaging amid its great artistic traditions and splicing them on to the wreckage of imperialism and racial capitalism in Africa. The processions that wind through this work and so many others lead from the shadows of Plato's cave via Goya's disasters of war, through slavery and miners' strikes and revolutionary parades to the long and growing queues of refugees and migrants that pass across digital screens in the 21st century. "My concern," he says, "has been both with the existential solitude of the walker, and with social solitude – lines of people walking in single file from one country to another, from one life to an unknown future."

William Kentridge is a dignified and gracious man but with something comedic about him. There is a vaguely childlike, even clownish energy that sometimes stirs within his relaxed frame. Born into

a family of famous lawyers, he remarks that speaking in public and thinking on his feet came easily – it was making art that seemed "a very unnatural and hard thing for me to do". The artist's father, Sir Sidney Kentridge (now 93), represented no fewer than three Nobel Peace Prize winners during his career – Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu – as well as the family of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko during the 1978 inquest into his death. The son remembers opening a thin yellow box in his father's study as a young boy, thinking it might contain chocolates. He was confronted with a series of shocking black-and-white photographs: of bodies stained with bullet wounds, lying spreadeagled across the veld. These were victims of the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 – images that his father was using as evidence against the state.

Watching Kentridge the younger talk, you wish that more artists might have had failed acting careers. In the Norton lecture he gave at Harvard in 2012 under the title "Six Drawing Lessons" (they



'Winterreise', 2013



can all be watched online), he speaks about filming his eight-year-old son, who is tasked with tearing up paper, scattering pencils and throwing paint all over the studio. Then the footage is run backwards: "There is a utopian perfection. The papers reconstruct themselves perfectly every time. He gathers them all. He catches 12 pencils, all arriving from different corners of the room in the same moment... His joy at his own skill is overflowing."

To make his point in the real time of the lecture, Kentrige then starts to enact what he has just said in reverse, AS IF I COULD, walking backwards as he does so: DUK I FI SA. Forward again, AS IF I COULD SWALLOW, then backwards: OLLAWS DUK FI SA. It is a silly moment (the audience laughs) but at the same time one treated with seriousness. All this (we gather) is simply a necessary ridiculousness, perhaps on the way to something insightful.

There are many lessons that flow from this deliberate backwardness, this measured playfulness. One is the importance of surrendering to an activity, obeying its arbitrary strictures as

assiduously as possible in order to see where all this will lead. The sheer urge to make things, Kentrige says, is experienced as a physical impulse that he can feel, almost taste, in his pectoral muscles prior to drawing, a bodily overflow that must take arbitrary shape in the world. This excess, this anti-minimalism, leaves its traces in everything from the early etchings and charcoal drawings to the shadow processions and multi-screen installations that form his more recent works: "messy, boozy, overlapping series of stories and films, dances and drawings".

Buried within it all is an impulse to run not just film but also history backwards, to reanimate the socialist utopias of the early 20th century before they failed. The artistic language of the Socialist Internationals, of interwar modernism and constructivism provides much of the lumber in his artistic universe. The studio itself is full of tripods and easels and ladders and other machines with legs that call to mind Dziga Vertov's 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera*. I looked at my inadequate notes of our meeting: THINGS ON STILTS.

When starting out as an artist in Johannesburg, William Kentrige recalls, there was the challenge of trying to hold in mind entirely different visual worlds. On the one hand, the tradition of European landscape painting that he had been schooled in, with its lushness, its incised V-shapes and receding planes. On the other, the scrub-coloured edges of his native city: a place of migrant labour hostels and political resistance, of casual violence and bodies lying in the veld. A place where the sublime only ever arrived in summer – in huge cumulus nimbus clouds that massed ahead of thunderstorms – and the only hills available were the tailings dams of the gold mines, tinted yellow by the cyanide that leached the metal from its ore.

So much about modern South Africa begins with the mines, and this strange, industrially remodelled landscape also provides an origin myth for Kentrige's career. In starting to draw it in the 1970s, and then resuming in the 80s after a failed attempt to be an actor, he found it hard to know when the images were finished. And so he began to photograph them at different stages of completion, trying to pinpoint that moment when

He provincialises Europe, rummaging amid its great artistic traditions and splicing them on the wreckage of imperialism

ONLINE VIDEO

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the marks on paper were no longer schematic or underdeveloped but not yet cluttered or too busy. As an unintended by-product, the experiment led to animations, or as he calls them, drawings for projection, a form of "Stone Age film-making" in which minute alterations and erasures are made to the charcoal images, each one painstakingly recorded frame by frame.

From the late 1980s, stretching across South Africa's political transition, Kentrige's deliberately anachronistic techniques proved utterly timely in engaging questions of social trauma and historical memory: in evoking a moment when so much of the past was made to vanish in plain sight but still hovered in the mind's eye.

Today there is still something uncanny and unresolved about these films, emerging as they do from an undermined, haunted city. In a sequence from one, *Felix in Exile* (1994), sheets of paper blow across a semi-industrial landscape of burnt grass and mine dumps. They cover a fallen body, then lift off again towards the horizon, leaving behind a trail of imperfect rubbings out, where charcoal dust stays lodged in the paper fibres. It is a beautiful, complex image that seems to reveal something secret about the artist's brain. It keeps alive, in a ghostly trace, all the time and labour and judgment that have gone into those few seconds.

"As an artist," William Kentrige has said, "my job is to make art, not to make sense." But in fact, he makes a lot of sense, particularly when speaking about art. To all the mediums that he has worked in over the last four decades – charcoal, animation, metal, sculpture, puppets, theatre, opera and stage design, textiles and tapestry, collage and cut-outs – one needs to add language itself. There are not many artists who have given such hyper-articulate accounts of their own work. And, in fact, one of the surprises in meeting WK and getting a tour of his Johannesburg studio was the extent to which his art begins in words.

Each day starts with the writing down of phrases in a notebook, one of which he was now paging through, with the matter-of-factness of someone explaining a complex dream that is entirely obvious to the dreamer.

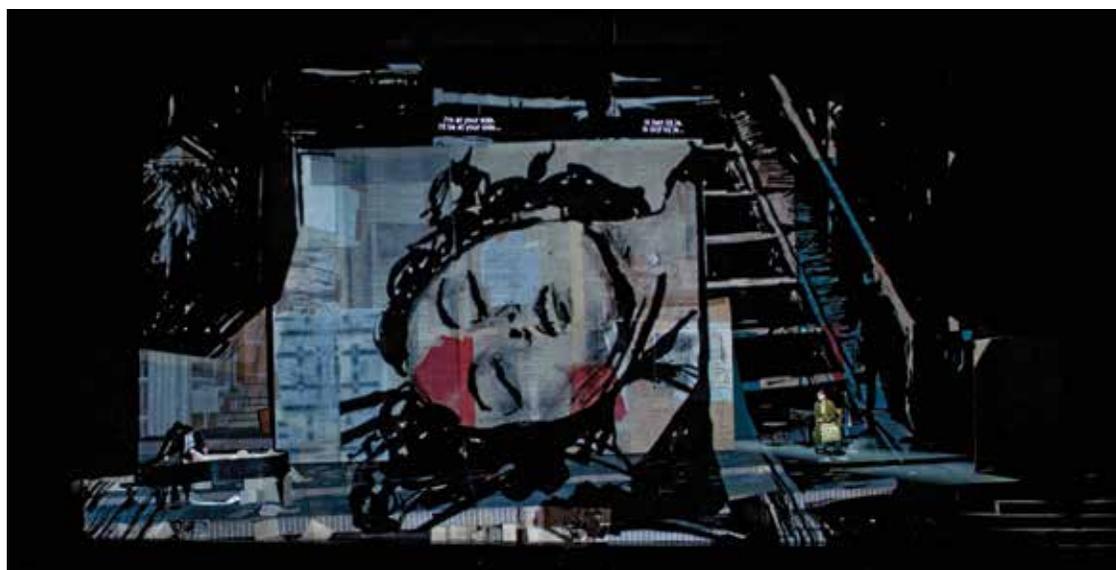
"HISTORY ON ONE LEG," he said, "that's the 1980s and the *toyitoyi*, of course, brought back from guerrilla training camps in Zimbabwe." The *toyitoyi* is a high-stepping South African protest march, or rather a dance, which rocks you from one leg to another: fearsome and playful at the same time. "The BOOK OF SLIGHTS, do you know the concept? From a Yiddish word: when you're not invited to the bar mitzvah, or not seated at one of the good tables – you keep a meticulous record of all these things. FUGITIVE WORDS, words that just won't come, that go awol for a while. The other day it was diorama, then sledgehammer, and so on. Where do they go?"

Seeing I was intrigued, he marched me over to a storeroom that contained a drawer of them – THERE WAS NO EPIPHANY, ANTI-ADVICE – a whole heap of word compost, waiting to germinate images. Some had even migrated to the walls: YESTERDAY'S GOOD IDEA hung behind a ladder.

"What I meant," he said, "is that there are very few projects that I have done, very few in which ▶

SECOND-HAND READING: 2003 FIIPROOK FILM FROM DRAWINGS ON SINGLE PAGES OF THE SHORTER OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY; HD VIDEO (COLOUR, SOUND) 77:01 MIN. (CDD); PHOTOGRAPHER: THIS IS DOLLART; 7 FRAGMENTS; 9 CHANNEL VIDEO INSTALLATION WITH SOUND; 16 MM AND 35 MM FILM; BASED ON LIVE-ACTION, VIDEO AND ANIMATED DRAWING, TRANSFERRED TO VIDEO, COLOUR

'I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings'



"Lulu", Dutch National Opera and Ballet, Amsterdam, 2015. Opposite: Kentridge with "Untitled (Bicycle Wheel II)"

◀ the first idea has carried through. Sometimes I think I've got this great idea and I think, damn, it's too early. It's the beginning of the project, so even though it seems such a clear good idea, just historically I know that it's unlikely to be there in the end."

He went on: "I want to start a small art centre, where people could do experimental art, productions, operas, things they wouldn't get to do elsewhere. I'm thinking of calling it the Centre for the Less Good Idea, or the Institute for the Less Good Idea."

Another of the pieces that will appear in the Whitechapel Gallery this month is "7 Fragments for Georges Méliès". It is a tribute to the French stage magician and conjuror who made some 500 short films when the medium was young and marvelling in its strengths. They explore the illusions that can be achieved by stopping time, running it backwards, splicing frames in or out. Tearing paper becomes mending, scattering gathering. Which raises the second order question: how to tear something so that (backwards) it will convincingly look like mending; how to scatter paper so that the re-gathering of it will look natural, easeful. Even the most ordinary, automatic things – like walking – must be meticulously choreographed and rehearsed.

The "Fragments" are also a tribute to the utopian space of the studio itself: a laboratory for conducting mock-serious experiments in creative process, then meticulously logging them, so that the artworks

emerge less as precious artefacts in themselves than as by-products or residue or some other, more important impulse that has already moved on. The studio should be a safe space for stupidity, a place where conditions for fortunate accidents are to be maximised and good ideas in the abstract mistrusted. LEAP BEFORE YOU LOOK.

William Kentridge's studio is a generous, high-ceilinged space: an airy hangar full of unfinished drawings, linocuts, etchings and stage set models. The cameras trained in different directions make it feel slightly like a laboratory; an upper balcony lends a touch of the theatre. A time lapse of the two hours I spent there would reveal us moving back and forth between different micro-locales in the space. Here we are looking at a cardboard set design for an Alban Berg opera, *Wozzeck*, and then a charcoal drawing for it, made from a photograph of the first world war. A German soldier crouches in the trenches, using a huge ear trumpet to listen across no man's land for the enemy: a backwards megaphone.

Now we are clustered round his assistant's iMac, looking at images of the huge frieze of figures that had been power-hosed into existence along the banks of the Tiber.

"Because it's Rome, there were strict limits on the amount of pressure we could use, and the shape of the nozzle," Kentridge explained. "So you could

get the wall much whiter, but that was as white as we could, and in fact it's a nice gentle hue. They'll disappear again, of course, in time."

Now we are watching footage of a man playing the theremin, a musical instrument that translates hand positions into a keening electronic wail. This comes into the sequence in "O Sentimental Machine", a work premiered last year in Istanbul, where Kentridge impersonates footage of Leon Trotsky making a speech: speech translated into gesticulation, then gesture into sound via the electromagnetic waves of the theremin. "A sentimental but programmable machine – that was Trotsky's definition of the human being," he explains, "The human as 'a semi-manufactured product'."

Now we are paging through an exhibition catalogue in German with drawings that come alive when you look at them through a smartphone: the copperplate type weaving and unweaving itself in and out of existence. Is this an enhanced book?

"No, this is just a book. But the software in the phone – you know. Augmented reality, I think they call it. We pre-empted Pokémon."

It's tempting to see Kentridge's art as a refuge from, or a refusal of, digital imaging: a primitive, analogue laboriousness in the very teeth of the digital onslaught. But I sensed that he was not one of those people to get stuck on arbitrarily championing one kind of technology over another. That he was (wielding an iPhone with great dexterity) that refreshing thing: an older person with time for gadgets. He spoke with admiration about how the photographer Zanele Muholi had arrived with not one but two assistants, who began live-tweeting from the moment they arrived – "And of course it's doubly important if you're an activist."

We broke for lunch but the restless migration of images followed us into the main house. In the kitchen where we sat down with his family, bronze figures processed along a top shelf: men with megaphone heads, walking corkscrews, a Bialetti on the move. Some had passed in turn into a large tapestry in the next room. Two black, stilted cardboard cut-outs (sextants, compasses?) had become woven shapes obscuring a page of an atlas: a translation into textiles of the artist's insatiable desire to draw over text. Disembowelled encyclopedias, defaced accounts ledgers and liturgical tracts: on the hundreds, if not thousands of pages that Kentridge has marked, naive shapes dance across the oppressive knowingness of Enlightenment rationality and everything that it became when exported to the rest of the world – a humanism that was not extended to all humans.

In all of William Kentridge's studio, I noticed just one rectangle of pure abstraction. It was a grey void, a wash of charcoal dust that was (he explained) the remnant of an animated explosion – part of a series of drawings of the first world war for *Wozzeck*. Kentridge has become one of the world's most recognisable artists by deliberately refusing the conceptual and non-representational languages of so much modern art.

"Much of what was contemporary in Europe and America during the 1960s and 1970s," he said, "seemed distant and incomprehensible to me." Its images were familiar from exhibitions and catalogues, "but the impulses behind the work did not make the transcontinental jump to South Africa" given its political situation. Yet at the same time, his work stretches the definition of that last

LULU PHOTOGRAPH: CIARICHEN & MATTHIAS BAUS AND DUTCH NATIONAL OPERA; COURTESY WILLIAM KENTRIDGE, MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, GOODMAN GALLERY AND LIA RUMMA GALLERY; ZANELE MUHOLI STEVENSON GALLERY

phrase: "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."

At a recent exhibition of his work in Berlin, he told me, an actor had given false tours of the show, a kind of Dadaist walkabout in which "explaining" the pieces just consisted of stacking up more cryptic phrases and non sequiturs.

"She took the group up to an artwork and used a script generated from these phrases I have been working with. So she would point at this one and say 'Here we have THE INVENTION OF AFRICA, which of course can be explained in terms of SEVEN CORPSES IN THREE MINUTES and DEFINING THE SHORELINES'. Or then: 'Here is LOOKING AT THE SUN, which of course refers to SHARPEN YOUR PHILOSOPHY, and is in dialogue with A SINGLE VOICE LOOKING FOR A CONVERSATION', and so on." I liked the idea of an anti-tour, and thought that more of those audio guides that people walk around with in galleries should contain productive misinformation.

What are they, these textual bits have begun to float through more and more of his works, summoning but also undercutting their own authority? Maxims, adages, axioms, epigrams, apothegms, aphorisms? They flash up on the walls in "The Refusal of Time", punctuating without explaining: IN PRAISE OF PRODUCTIVE PROCRASTINATION, PERFORMANCES OF TRANSFORMATION, ANTI-ENTROPY.



Zanele Muholi, who took these portraits of William Kentridge, was born in the township of Umlazi, Durban, in 1972, and studied in Johannesburg and Toronto. As a portraitist and visual activist, the term she prefers, she has been recognised around the world. In 2002 she co-founded the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) and in 2009 set up Inkaniso, focusing on visual-arts activism and education. Her portrait series "Faces and Phases", made as a protest at homophobia and hate crime in South Africa, was published by Steidl and was at the heart of her first major US show, at New York's Brooklyn Museum, last year (stevenson.info/).

Perhaps they are anti-aphorisms. An aphorism, that rather unlikeable genre, seeks to condense wisdom into a single line, to distil the world into a fragment of text. These anti-aphorisms seem to reverse the process, working like an index of unrealised ideas, as coordinates or mnemonic prompts to a private world that can never be, or should never be, fully explained.

"I'm working on a lecture on the body in art now", said Kentridge as he walked me out. "In making art, I mean. How it moves, how it performs".

We had been looking at "non-existent sculptures" through a stereoscope: 3D images made with time-lapse and a torch. A horse outlined brightly in thin air, the artist lurking behind it as a ghostly presence. "To the outsider it's just someone making a series of disconnected gestures – it's only through here that you see the horse."

Here he dropped down and did a horse dance, tracing it invisibly in the crisp Johannesburg air.

"At the beginning of a drawing, I find I use my whole body. Then it's from the whole body to your shoulder, then to your elbow, then your wrist, until you're just using your knuckles. I'm not good with using just my knuckles – then I know it's time to stop." **FT**

William Kentridge's exhibition "Thick Time" is at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, from 21 September until January 15 2017 (whitechapelgallery.org); "Lulu" is at the English National Opera, London, November 9-19 (eno.org). Hedley Twidle lectures in English at the University of Cape Town. His essays and stories are available at seapointcontact.wordpress.com

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