On Defectibility as Resource: William Kentridge's Art of Imperfection, Lack and Falling Short

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

In 1997 I asked William Kentridge to comment on Theodor Adorno's assertion of 1949 that, after Auschwitz, it would be barbaric to write poetry.[i] He replied: "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."

Kentridge often uses the word "dulling" to indicate a state of insensibility towards what should, or could, be intensely and "authentically" experienced. His creative impulse stems from exploring the effects of that "dulling." Just as Kentridge sees "dulling" as a two-sided coin - the "alas" but "thank goodness" for poetry - he perceives the world of drawing as a double-edged practice. For Kentridge it comprises both intentionality and chance, making marks and erasing them, revealing how vision is constructed while encouraging the loss of oneself in the fiction he stages. There is an atmosphere of deep sadness, a sense of loss, and an acute sensibility to pain in much of his art, and yet there is also humor, and an appreciation of pleasure, weakness and whim. His work also expresses a healthy sense of self-doubt, of constantly falling short of an ideal.[ii]

From a feminist perspective, the self Kentridge projects is that of the ideal man of the future: shying away from any form of grand scheme, he keeps masculine power and the patriarchal gaze in constant check. He welcomes imperfection, failures, shadows, oblique glances rather than direct views, provisional moments of beauty rather than attempts at grand accomplishments. He is a truly experimental artist, but prefers not to be an innovator. His interests are broad, and the techniques he employs vary from charcoal on paper to chalk drawings onto the landscape, from shadow puppetry to etchings, from 16 or 35mm film to digital video, from torn paper figures directly applied to walls to traditional tapestries and bronze sculptures (based on his son's broken Rambo-esque plastic dolls) from live-action film to reversed film based on drawings made by ants crawling over sugar poured onto paper in his studio. Yet for all this variety and openness to experiment, he does not value innovative practice, per se, nor art-historical breakthroughs in style or technique, preferring the realm of obsolescence.[iii] In sum, he defects from rather than enlists in the vanguard.

When Adorno made his famous statement, it seemed impossible to render the horrors of the Holocaust through the mediation of language, as well as ethically unjust to create an aesthetic experience out of such brutal real-life events. In the face of the nightmare, 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 the philosophy of Existentialism and a generation of abstract artists associated with European Art Informel, or American Abstract Expressionism and Action Painting. Here, 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. Franz Kline's large-scale black and white gestures, Jackson

Pollock's drip paintings, Jean Dubuffet's Art Brut, Wols' tentative and intimate marks and graffiti, or Alberto Burri's torn and sutured sacking, were examples of this response to the overwhelming nature of historical events.

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, such as that of Max Beckmann, Hannah Hoch, or George Grosz. Advanced artists felt that a direct representation of concentration-camp scenes - barbed wire, striped camp uniforms, brutal guards, watchtowers, etc. - ran the risk of banalizing the horror into predictable and over-explicit images and spectacle. By abstracting that representation, art, it seemed, became more universal, and therefore more true. Furthermore, figurative art was identified with "arts of power," such as Italian Novecento or Social Realism.

A notion of authenticity, already present in post-war abstraction, continued to be central to art throughout the 1960s in Europe and America. 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, in the form of billboards, posters and magazine advertisements. In Minimalism, Land Art and Arte Povera, representation was also rejected as inauthentic: in many cases, the site itself determined the artwork. In other cases, the artist's body, or raw and found organic and inorganic materials were used by artists in lieu of representation. As the title of a well-known exhibition in Bern of 1969 suggested "attitudes became form."[iv]

Conceptual Art emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s out of dissatisfaction with the ability of Pop and Minimalism radically to disrupt society, and posited critical thought itself as artwork. Based on the politicized 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 on the one hand, and was co-opted by advertising and media on the other. Thus in some ways it failed to reach its objectives. This created a context for the questioning of the radical nature of Conceptualism by artists working on the periphery of the international art world in places where the effects on daily life of poor planning, uncontrolled free-market theories and racism were all too real.

In Europe, by the late 1970s, Conceptualism had also reached a form of solipsistic isolation from the audience, and a sense of the collapse of its utopian avant-gardism ushered in a return to tradition and romantic forms of *atelier* painting with New Painting, the Transavangard and Neo-Expressionism in the early 1980s. Advanced and politically committed artists both in the West and in postcolonial contexts, although sharing dissatisfaction with Conceptual Art's aloofness, could not engage in this practice, however, since it was felt that it reinstated Romantic notions of authorship and heroism, far from any sense of art's direct role in society. New painting was also associated by the more radical with the commercialization and institutionalization of contemporary art during the 1980s.

In South Africa, Kentridge perceived Conceptual Art as too cryptic, over-intellectualized and removed from the reality of human suffering. His simple, immediate drawings are a rebellion against the anonymity and homogeneity of "contemporary" languages of representation, as well as the non-representational abstract art developed during modernism. 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.

At that time, Kentridge was a young artist who had studied Politics and African Studies at college, taken art classes, admired the radical ink and charcoal drawings of South African artist and activist

Durnile, and was engaged in anti-Apartheid activities. He was interested in Hogarth's satires, Goya's *Disasters of War* (1810-1820, 1st edition 1863) and Beckmann's satires of Weimar society in the early 20th century. Neo-Expressionist, heroic and bohemian atelier painting was certainly not an option for him to pursue. It is perhaps precisely because Kentridge's art developed at a distance from Europe and America, and from the debates during the late 1970s and 1980s, that he was able to take a fresh look at the progressive and socially critical tradition of pre-war Expressionism and figuration without resorting to nostalgia. He could therefore question both the anti-iconic nature of modernist, avant-garde abstract art, as well as the Conceptual legacy, while avoiding Neo-Expressionism. Humor, an interest in process, poor materials such as charcoal and paper, as well as the provisional nature of each image, kept those neo-Expressionist elements at bay.

Born in Johannesburg in 1955, at an early age Kentridge became aware of the brutality of South African society. 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. He grew up in a liberal South African household. His parents were both lawyers and worked with anti-Apartheid activists and groups.[v] Kentridge took part early on in drama workshops and art classes, which he had begun as a teenager at the Johannesburg Art Foundation. 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. For several years Kentridge taught etching there, and although he made a number of early paintings, it was on the "poorer" medium of drawing and printmaking that he soon focused his attention. His first exhibition in 1979 included a number of monoprints and some drawings. These dark gray, claustrophobic works show figures in pits being watched from above by faceless individuals, a vision of people living in a closed society from which there is no escape. They prefigure later images of enclosure, such as the curtains around the hospital bed in *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), Felix's hotel room in *Felix in Exile* (1994), or Soho's double and enclosed space in *Stereoscope* (1999).

Experiencing feelings of inadequacy, however, Kentridge stopped making visual art for some years, pursuing film and theater instead - 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 doctor, where he studied mime and theater. He is still deeply involved in theater, having created numerous performances with the Handspring Puppet Company.

It was not until 1984 that Kentridge returned to drawing, engaging in a series of large works on paper, sometimes narratively grouped in triptychs, like *Dreams of Europe* (1984-85). These sketchy drawings present charged, haunted settings. Multi-layered and dynamic, they combine deep, abysmal spaces with compressed perspectives. From these drawings of the 1980s to his animated films of the 1990s, Kentridge's works were marked by the urgency of taking part in truly momentous historical events - the civil rights movement in South Africa. He was trying to make sense of the violence that characterized the last period of Apartheid in his country.

Kentridge's Lithuanian and German-Jewish origins had always meant that he navigated an awkward position in South Africa:

"In South Africa, which has always been defined by its rulers as a very Christian country, to be Jewish is to be other. *There were always Jewish people prominent in the anti-Apartheid movement, in the Communist Party, the ANC, or the liberal party. (There were of course many who took part in these activities and profited from their circumstances as did all white South Africans.) But there is a palpable irony for South African Jews. Our Passover ceremony every year remembers the Jews as slaves in Egypt. And in the ceremony it is spoken about as if we ourselves had been slaves, while in*

fact we were the apposite. This contradiction did not change the fact that Jews had a historical context for understanding the desire to be free of fetters. But in the present, we are absolutely not part of those most oppressed. That remains an uncomfortable irony to live with."[vi]

Kentridge's dilemma from the outset was that he did not want to pursue the fiction of making South Africa look like a "white" Arcadia, in the manner of the colonial painters of South Africa such as Jacobus Pierneef - yet he could not easily speak for the "black" either, nor provide a platform or voice for the "other." He could only explore a zone of uncertainty and shifting meanings through the portrayal of a "double-bind" where guilt and expiation express the condition of the privileged.

The denunciatory works belonging to this "revolutionary" period in South African history include the short animated films Kentridge called "drawings for projection," begun in 1989, and for which he has become most known: *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* (1989), *Monument* (1990), *Mine* (1991), *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* (1991) and *Felix in Exile* (1994).[vii] These films present the evils of avidity and power, and the struggle for emancipation against the background of pain and suffering experienced by exploited miners in a ravaged landscape. They employ stock characters and the miraculous transformations typical of cartoons, thus communicating on various levels and avoiding the heroics of "high art." The films chronicle the rise and fall of a white Johannesburg magnate, Soho Eckstein. Always seen wearing a pin-striped suit, Soho buys land, builds mines and develops his "empire," which finally crumbles. He is counterpoised with Kentridge's alter ego, the naked, sensual artist, lover and dreamer Felix Teitlebaum.

The technique used for what the artist has called the "stone-age filmmaking" in these works, is based on 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 an ongoing process across a small number of drawings. These range from about twenty for shorter films to roughly sixty for longer ones, each corresponding with the final stage of a scene in the film. The narrative emerges through a sequence of broadly related scenes and recurring "personae" reflecting different perspectives on the world and various aspects of the artist's own self.

Numerous essays on Kentridge's work, as well as his own lectures and interviews, have over the years pointed out how his technique of erasure engenders a time-based, open form of "process" drawing, which can never be definitive. This openness to change, and "un-finiteness" of language, is an aesthetic position that is based on a political perspective - a refusal of all authoritarian and authoritative forms of communication embedded in most usages, from advertising to politics. The process of fracture remains visible, establishing a jerky effect (tempered by the film's musical soundtrack) 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. 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.

The technique of filming consecutive moments of erasure and drawing was not a novelty in the field of animation, and had been variously used in the age of early film and the history of animation. But the way in which Kentridge uses it as a metaphor for a new, flexible model of parallel thinking, a paradigm of radical thought made up of indirect gazes, shadows, and of continuously "falling short," is grounded in a basic duality and ambivalence that is particularly topical today. "Erasure" in his art is used as a metaphor for the loss of historical memory - the

amnesia to which injustice, racism and brutality are subjected in society. (Often Kentridge depicts scenes of bodies lying on the ground, becoming erased and "absorbed" into the landscape through transformation into mere rocks or bumps in a barren environment punctuated by the detritus of civil engineering.)

Yet "erasure" - as opposed to pristine, exact line drawing - is also a metaphor for the healthy questioning of the certainties and preconceptions lying behind human relations in what might only appear to be an increasingly interactive and democratic world of the digital age. It questions the notion that any definitive statement is ever possible; it denies the value of complete or binary theories of politics and social relations (or of any finished artwork, for that matter). Kentridge's device of erasure allows the emergence of a palimpsest - a synchronic image that contains its own diachronic denial through a layering of traces of earlier drawings that have been erased.

This ambivalence, joined with an astounding draughtsmanship, is what brought Kentridge to the fore as one of today's most significant artists. His work is uniquely personal and yet also expresses the field of contradictions in today's culture, at a delicate moment in which modernity, the West and post-colonial realities must evolve dynamically in order to prevent globalization from becoming a degenerative moment in world history.

Kentridge's choice of figuration as an avant-garde and radical practice ties into his acknowledgement of cultural amnesia. Rather than representation - which actually distances the viewer from experience by focusing on content and information, as it had done in pre-modernist practice and in much conservative art of the 20th century - figuration and narrative became a way of relating the inner landscape (personal memory) with the outer landscape of social and political events at large. Even when politically radical, as in much neo-conceptual work of today, documentary footage allows for a detached gaze (the viewer identifying with and protected by the camera's eye as in news broadcasts). However, Kentridge's hand-drawn scenes of individuals carrying out mundane daily activities - petting a cat, sitting at a desk, walking along a path and picking up a stone, having coffee, shaving in front of a mirror - portrayed against a background of extreme and outrageous events - a dog's head with earphones exploding into bits, bodies being beaten and shot, terminal illness in a hospital ward, cows starving and dying along the beach - connect the specificity of daily life (with which every viewer can identify) to the broader moral and ethical issues of active citizenship. *This* device recalls the way in which James Joyce managed to ground his writing so specifically in Dublin that it paradoxically became universal. It is the local nature of much of what Kentridge draws that allows the work to engage so intimately with viewers everywhere. It is the specifics of pain and the minutiae of the intimate lives depicted against the backdrop of events in South Africa that transform them into scenes that could be happening almost anywhere. We recognize our own weaknesses, our dreams, desires and fears.

In many ways, Kentridge's themes recall the preoccupations of Holocaust survivors, just as his drawings sometimes echo those of labor camp prisoners. The hard physical toil and the notorious "boxes" - bunk-beds stacked one above the other - depicted in one of his earliest animated films, *Mine* (1991), which follows a day in the life of the mines, recall drawings made by prisoners in labor camps. 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 de-humanised masses incarcerated in the camps. Yet the Holocaust - and Apartheid - transcend their original meaning and become a symbol of the tragedy of modernity as a whole.

As a consequence, guilt, complicity and indirect responsibility are key themes in Kentridge's art. In connection with this he also portrays the intolerable position of being a survivor and a witness. In *Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old* (1991), Felix is a witness of protest marches; in *Felix in Exile*

(1994), he watches abuses and the shooting of the female character Nandi from his hotel room. And in *History of the Main Complaint* (1996) Soho observes violent brutality through the windshield of his car. In *Stereoscope* (1999), he is overwhelmed by the echoes of troubles going on outside his enclosed space to the point where his "self" splits into two separate but adjacent rooms, representing the collapse of stereoscopic vision, and therefore of consciousness. In a series of unique prints made on book pages titled *Sleeping on Glass* (1999), Kentridge developed this theme using drawings of trees with splitting trunks, accompanied by phrases such as, "This is how the bow breaks" and "Terminal hurt/terminal longing."

The 1994 elections in South Africa brought an end to Apartheid and introduced a period of inquiry and national retribution represented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In this process, amnesty was given by the new government for crimes committed for the sake of the Apartheid government in return for full disclosure of those crimes by their perpetrators. Not by chance, in the years fallowing Apartheid, Kentridge's drawings and films began to express the weight of having been one of the privileged few, exploring the notion and implications of indirect responsibility. During the period of the Commission, when horrendous atrocities were recounted and legally forgiven, Kentridge made *Ubu Tells the Truth* (1996). This film, and the related theater production, depart from the Soho films, marking the height of Kentridge's explicit engagement in South African affairs. It does this through the use of documentary footage that alternates with rough chalk drawings in a work of intense human outcry. A series of large self-portrait drawings (including for instance a work called *The Flagellant),* inspired by Alfred Jarry's tyrant *Ubu roi* (1888), expressed this acute self-criticism.

In 1998, just four years after the African National Congress (ANC) was elected into power in South Africa, and Nelson Mandela became the first President of a post Apartheid nation, Kentridge stated: "There is a sort of wilful amnesia, a refusal to accept accountability, that comes from the naturalization of outrageous systems in the world. But I'm more interested in the question of historical memory - of what happens when people forget so quickly."[viii] In more recent years, Kentridge's art has focused on the attempt, both on the level of form and content, to reach through this form of post revolutionary "dullness" towards some "core" experience. In the late 1990s, when Felix and Soho fuse into two sides of the same persona, Kentridge's characters and suggested narratives take on a more introspective gaze. In this post-revolutionary period things seem to take place primarily in the brain of his characters, as the artist begins to analyze the dulling of memory, guilt and how we negotiate with our past. *History of the Main Complaint* (1996), *WEIGHING... and WANTING* (1998) and *Stereoscope* (1999) portray intimate, psychological and personal scenarios about consciousness and how to deal with memory and guilt in a post-Apartheid era. Images of medical pathology recur in the works, functioning as metaphors for the diseased body politic.

Early in 1999, Kentridge also began to create a new series of works that combined projected images with three-dimensional objects. While his character Soho was retreating into his inner universe of remembering and forgetting, Kentridge himself was grappling with how to give more substance to the immaterial world of what goes on in the mind. For an exhibition on the theme of memory in Rome in 1999, he created the animated film *Sleeping on Glass,* which was transferred to video and rear-projected onto the mirror of an old wooden chest of drawers. This new interest in shadows and projections onto objects was followed by other works such as *Medicine Chest* (2000), screened on the mirror of a cabinet, and *Learning the Flute* (2003), projected onto a blackboard. The universe of shadows, shadow puppetry and shadow projections began to capture his interests, both in theater and in his art projects. Shadows imply an indirect gaze and suggest that it is better, at times, to look aslant, and to remain off center. Kentridge has cast shadows of objects in animations such as *Shadow Procession* (1999), in the small bronze sculptures *Procession* (2000), and in his torn black

paper *Stair Procession* (2000 - see Jane Taylor's essay in this catalogue, pp. 41-57).

Kentridge's exploration of different forms of non-linear techniques and processes has included an investigation into the effects of reversal. In *Day for Night* (2003), for example, he used the negative film as opposed to the positive, while in his *Video reversal* drawings (2002) he projected recordings backwards rather than forwards. In his new live action film and video experiments titled *Fragments for Georges Méliès* (2003), he performed actions backwards and then reversed the direction of the projected film so that apparently normal actions appear oddly out of synch. Other recent series of works like *Projection for Drawing. Studio Portrait No.1* (2003) and *Projection for Drawing. Large Bird* (2003), which he significantly calls "projections *for* drawings," see Kentridge reversing his habitual technique of making sketches for projections in order to create large drawings that stem from projections of mundane objects onto paper pinned on his studio wall.

In his newest work *Tide Table* (2003), Kentridge has returned to his portrayal of Soho, as he did in *Stereoscope* (1999). This animated film again pulls his audience through the veil of dullness, which now becomes one of its explicit themes. At the seaside, Soho muses from the balcony of his hotel, or sits alone on a deck chair at the beach, reading the tide tables in a newspaper. Around him certain events take place: a group of people perform a baptism, accompanied by a choir; cows waste away and die; a child plays with stones in the shallow water; a man holds a sick body that is literally washed away, leaving only stones; some beach huts become a hospital ward filled with patients; the skull of an animal and an old wheelbarrow are washed up on shore. Water is no longer the passionate blue of Felix's world, but the colorless agent of erasure.

On one level, this new film portrays Soho's attempt at getting out of introspection, and to move into the world again. On another level, however, Soho is detached from all that surrounds him; no one notices him, and he dozes through most of these events. He is in a public space, with a community of people nearby, but he might as well be in his enclosed office or in his home - no sense of collective endeavor emerges. He is not as productive as he was in his office in the earlier films, nor even as connected with the outside world as he was when he lay terminally ill in a hospital ward in *History of the Main Complaint.* He is a guest at a hotel, an outsider, a temporary resident.

From the hotel balcony three generals (who resemble Soho) watch the landscape below through binoculars. They patrol the scene with their surveillance apparatus, yet there are no demonstrators below, no terrorists, no enemy or armies for them to combat. There is only the daily drama of illness, starvation and dying. We think of the horror of Aids claiming millions of lives in Africa, yet marginalized by the Western media. *Tide Table* suggests a sense of solitude even in the public sphere, of not knowing what to do, of an enforced holiday. Retrospection and memory are ineffective; they bring only alienation even from one's own past. Soho is unable to recognize his own childhood self, portrayed in the film as a boy skipping stones. In a moment of brief respite from solitude, a woman in a headscarf, portrayed from behind, holds his hand for a moment while he sleeps.

It is interesting to note that this melancholy film was made in the fall of 2003, after a period of intense and energetic experimentation with various techniques of drawing and recording that coincided with a residency at Columbia University in New York in 2001-2002. These experiments in the mechanics of making art and constructing vision resulted in displaced *Anamorphic drawings,* which can be experienced only by looking in a mirror cylinder at their center; in optical devices with drawings such as his *Phenakistoscope;* and in a return of interest in live-action filming, combined with drawing.[ix]

These recent playful and dramatic works express a dynamic expansion of filming and editing techniques that move the art forward experimentally, yet with no notion of linear progression. The result is the evocation of the implausible and mad, reminiscent of, yet distinct from, the work of

Western artists of the 1970s such as Bruce Nauman, who were exhibiting at the time in New York.[x] Kentridge understood the radical impulses behind Nauman's video and body-performance works, yet did not share the existentialist impulse towards phenomenological reduction. "It did not seem enough," Kentridge has commented, "for the body to be the gesture; the activity itself was not enough to justify the artist's incessant 'look at me, look at me' ... So when I look at Bruce Nauman's works, part of my astonishment is at his audacity to do so little and claim it is enough. A wonder and jealousy at his confidence in his place in the world, a kind of certainty that feels impossible to me."[xi]

This "madness" is achieved, even within the universe of live action film, by returning to some of the earliest techniques of cinema in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as the extravaganzas of Georges Méliès, who made a film, for example, where an entire apartment is pulled out of a suitcase.[xii] However, in a highly illuminating analysis focusing on Kentridge's short film *Monument,* in *October* magazine of Fall 2000, Rosalind Krauss has suggested that Kentridge deliberately pulls the work backwards to a pre-filmic moment.[xiii] She comments on how, when talking or writing about his art, Kentridge avoids directly addressing outrage over Apartheid (the "rock" as Kentridge described it in an essay of 1990),[xiv] shifting our attention away from content towards a discussion of his drawing and creative process. He never denounces injustices head on, as if suspicious of the ways in which historical memory is transformed into spectacle. He expands the field of improvisation by moving back and forth from the paper to the camera as he records the evolving drawing one frame at a time. During the time and space of this "dance," free associations occur - neither chance operations nor controlled actions - which ultimately determine the open narrative and the meaning of the artwork. His work emerges not out of a wish to achieve motion, to "animate," comments Krauss, but rather through the impulse to interrupt the flow of film, to reach back from filmic animation to a form of palimpsest, "dragging against the flow of film."[xv] Thus he evolves a new medium of automatism where the foregrounding of procedure induces meaning. The deliberate jerkiness resists cinematic illusion, and, adds Krauss, "Kentridge's technical alternative... sets his... 'drawings for projection' at an angle to animation, one that seems below it, which is to say even less technologically invested than the flicker book."[xvi]

The technological universe has by now so infected our bodily and graphic experiences, our subjectivity, that Kentridge's recourse to the palimpsest - even though the palimpsest has itself been infected by the technological - becomes a way of avoiding the spectacularization of memory. His work focuses among other things on the recrudescence of the hand-drawn in an age when popular culture is profoundly engaged with the digital. It is a form of "poor" animation, like Arte Povera's slowing down and reduction of experience in the 1960s, which emerged in antithesis to the speed and mediatization of culture in the post-war period.[xvii]

However, in Kentridge's most recent art, the hand-drawn itself becomes ambivalent. In his works up to *Stereoscope* (1999), which ends with alternating graphic images of the words "GIVE" and "FORGIVE," text was usually present only as block-letter intertitles that recalled early silent movies. In recent years, however, the distinction between drawing and writing has blurred in the artist's works through the growing presence of sinuous handwriting. Writing by hand is an intimate activity, and emerges in an area of the mind and body that is neither fully rational nor fully unintentional - it rarely occurs in the computer and digital age, and is an almost obsolete bodily activity, where the brain moves with the arm and hand almost like an automaton. It is not usually valued as a form of draughtsmanship, belonging more to a universe of regressive doodling. Again, Kentridge defects from the grand drawings that are expected of him.

In parallel fashion, machines and mechanical devices are no longer depicted as inherently violent in Kentridge's work. In early films such as *Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris,* Soho's

business concerns were represented through calculators, typewriters and papers filled with calculations and minute notations. Cameras on tripods became machine guns that could only be deflected from their aggressive nature through art (Monteverdi madrigals, rather than orders and speeches, broadcast from public-address speakers, for example). Now Kentridge has embarked on a journey to disenfranchise mechanics, no longer presenting them as dehumanizing instruments of control but rather as challenging devices to expand vision and open up complex visual thoughts through playful experimentation.

At about this time, Kentridge also began a series of drawings and prints on the pages of disembowelled books, physically overlaying the two universes of drawing and text. By the time he began to create the body of works inspired by Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923), in 2001, drawing and writing had merged fully in many images, and their connection continues to be foregrounded in even more recent works such as *Automatic Writing* (2003) and *Day for Night* (2003).

Svevo's original novel is introduced by a framing device according to which the entire story of Zeno is a diary that the character has written on the suggestion of his psychoanalyst. Aware of his own weaknesses yet unable to influence in any way the course of his own life, let alone take responsibility for his actions, the inept, guilt-ridden Zeno believes that life is a manifestation of illness, with its better and worse moments. He is weak willed, continuously resolving and failing to give up smoking, a trivial aim against the background of external events and the incipient First World War. Kentridge's avoidance of intentionality also recalls Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853). Bartleby is an office clerk who prefers not to participate in the productive endeavors of the burgeoning 19th-century modern world. He simply refuses to work in his office, yet he does not leave it, maintaining himself in what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has recently termed a state of "absolute potentiality," adopting the term from Medieval theologians. Agamben comments:

Bartleby calls into question precisely this supremacy of the will over potentiality. If God (at least the potentia ordinata) *is truly capable only of what he wants, Bartleby is capable only without wanting; he is capable only* de potentia absoluta. *But his potentiality is not, therefore, unrealized; it does not remain unactualized on account of a lack of will. On the contrary, it exceeds will (his own and that of others) at every point. Inverting Karl Valentin's witticism "I wanted to want it, but I didn't feel able to want it," one could say of Bartleby that he succeeds in being able (and not being able) absolutely without wanting it. Hence the irreducibility of his "I would prefer not to." It is not that he does not* want *to copy or that he does not want to leave the office; he simply would prefer not to. The formula that he so obstinately repeats destroys all possibilities of constructing a relation between being able and willing, between* potentia absoluta *and* potentia ordinata. *It is the formula of potentiality.*[xviii]

A similar negation of the relationship between being able and willing allows Kentridge himself to produce art without being prescriptive, to be original without being innovative, to be expressive without being expressionistic. One could say that he celebrates the erasure of his own drawing, and makes it a public and poetic act of defection, just as in more recent years he has celebrated not objects but their shadows, side stepping the dilemma between making and not making.

---

[i] "It is a barbaric act to think of writing a work of poetry after Auschwitz," *È un atto di barbarie pensare di scrivere un'opera di poesia dopo Auschwitz,* T.W. Adorno, *Critica della cultura e società,* 1949, in *Prismen. Kulturpolitik und Gesellschaft,* Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1955.

ii "The idea of animation as continuously falling short I like a lot - like the description of walking as falling and stopping yourself from falling" (W. Kentridge, unpublished quote, 2003).

iii "Obsolescence operates on various levels in his work. Kentridge draws upon a European legacy of oppositional art from Goya to Hogarth to Beckmann, and his work is oddly out of synch with current trends. Though he uses the prevailing technology of video projection the drawings that form the basis of his animated films retain an old-fashioned appearance, as opposed to a documentary-conceptual one. A sense of belonging to a cultural 'periphery' of Europe, and therefore of geographic distance from a 'center,' 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 twentieth-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 (C. Christov-Bakargiev, *William Kentridge,* William Kentridge, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Bruxelles, p. 11).

iv "Live in Your Head: when Attitudes Become Form," Kunsthalle, Bern, 1969.

v Afrikaners were Dutch, German and French colonials who settled in 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. Afrikaner nationalism grew during the 19th century and was further heightened as a consequence of the Anglo-Boer War (1899- 1902). The National Party of Afrikaners came to power with the 1948 elections. Although segregation of black and colored Africans had already existed for decades, segregation was accelerated, codified by law and enforced during Apartheid. Townships and separate education programs were officially set up to encourage a multinational state in which different ethnic groups could maintain their own culture autonomously. Sexual relations between racial groups were banned and whites developed a form of paternalistic racism, which was proposed as positive. Laws were passed to classify the population into white, colored and indigenous.

vi "Breaking Down the Wall," William Kentridge interviewed by Bell Hooks, *Interview,* New York, September 1998, p. 182 [quote revised by William Kentridge in 2003 for this essay].

vii Animated drawings are also used as backdrops in the theater productions that Kentridge has made in collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company since 1992.

viii Hooks, *op. cit.,* p. 167.

ix Kentridge had already experimented in this vein with his early *Memo,* 1993.

x January 10- July 27, 2002, Dia: Chelsea, Dia Art Foundation, New York, 2002.

xi Unpublished quote, 2003.

xii *Le locataire diabolique,* 1909.

xiii In *Monument* Soho presents himself to a crowd as a civic benefactor, giving a public address followed by the unveiling of a monument - the sculpture of a laborer carrying a heavy load. As in Samuel Beckett's play *Catastrophe* (1982) which inspired Kentridge, in the last moments of *Monument,* one sees that the figure with the load is actually alive. He becomes the image of a defiant reality unwilling to become subjugated to Soho's control.

xiv "These two elements - pure history and the moral imperative arising from that - are the factors for making that personal beacon rise into the immovable rock of Apartheid. To escape this rock is the job of the artist. These two constitute the tyranny of our history. And escape is necessary, for as I stated the rock is possessive and inimical to good work. I am not saying that Apartheid, or indeed, redemption are not worthy of representation, description or exploration, I am saying that the scale and weight with which this rock presents itself is inimical to that task," W. Kentridge, "Dear Diary: Suburban Allegories and Other Infections," 1990, published in C. Christov-Bakargiev, *op. cit.,* pp. 74-77.

^{xv} R. Krauss, "'The Rock': William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection," *October,* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, Spring 2000, p. 10.

^{xvi} Ibid., pp. 19-20.

^{xvii} See *Animations,* the catalogne of an exhibition focusing on this issue, held at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center / a MoMA Affiliate, in Fall 2000 and touring to Kunstwerke, Berlin in 2002.

^{xviii} G. Agamben, *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy,* Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1999, pp. 254-255 [1st edition 1993, G. Deleuze, G. Agamben, *Bartleby. La formula della creazione,* Edizioni Quod Libet, Macerata, 1993, pp. 61-62].