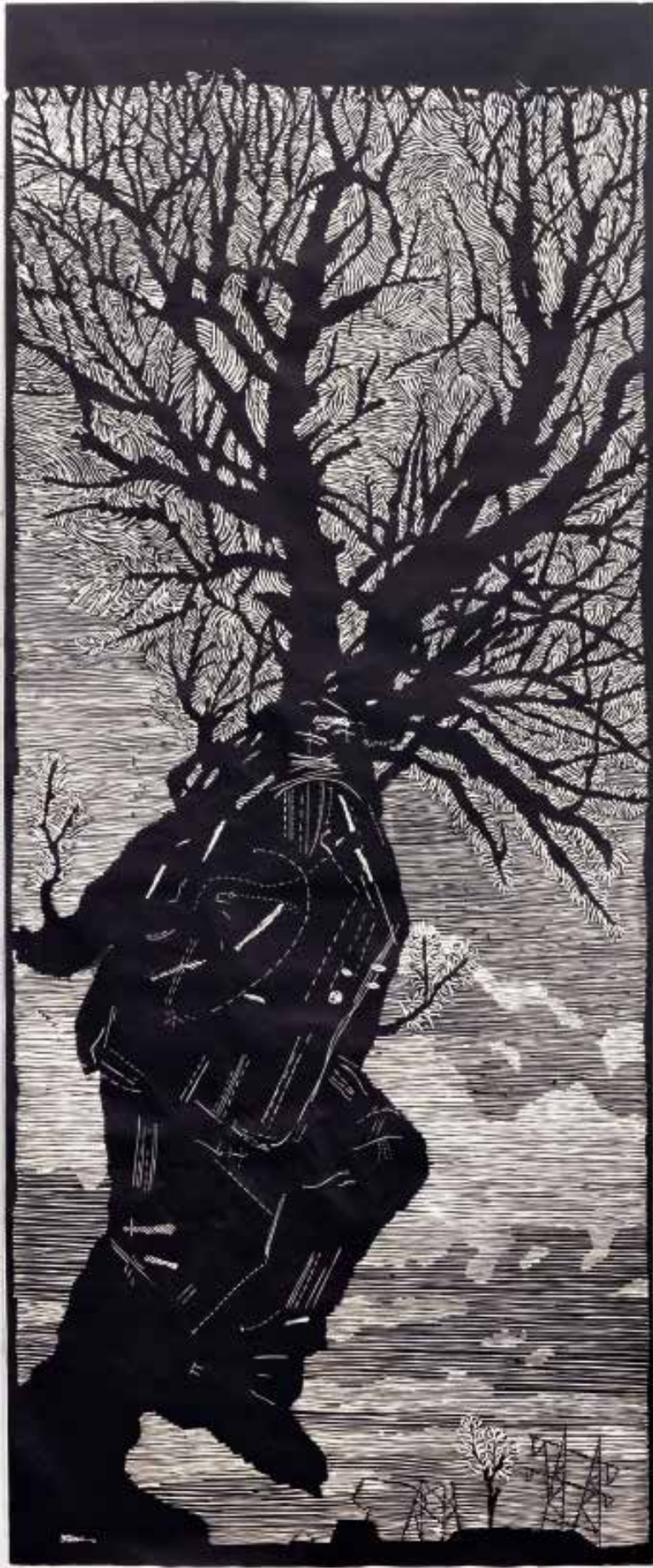


**William
Kentridge**

Listen to the Echo

Museum Folkwang
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

Steidl



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Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot

In the studio

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev



At 30, in 1985, William Kentridge presented one of his first exhibitions of drawings at Cassirer Fine Arts in Johannesburg. He exhibited some of his earliest large charcoal and pastel or crayon on paper drawings. In her review of the exhibition for the local newspaper *The Star*, Samantha James wrote, "Although the figures are sometimes loosely drawn, the atmosphere and imagery in these charcoal compositions is immensely powerful. Kentridge is a master of the dramatic angle. The drawings give the impression of being snatches of an almost haunting world; remembered, visualised and fantasised *in separate chambers of the mind*. He continues this feeling by *dividing some of the pictures with a gap, as if they are envisaged (literally) with two minds*. They portray yearning and decadence with a boldness of line; generating such force it becomes a substitute for appropriate action."¹

It is astonishing that 40 years later, precisely this "substitute for appropriate action" expressed through picture-making "as if envisaged (literally) with two minds" and "fantasised in separate chambers of the mind" is the topic of his most recent self-reflective nine-episode series of digital videos *Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot* that premiered in 2024 in Venice.² Here the artist appears doubled (and sometimes tripled or quadrupled) in his own studio, talking to himself, disagreeing with himself, pacing the studio and working, alone, with his doppelgängers, or with others. And over and over, the simple quotidian, silent coffee pot appears in the work – as a witness to the artist's apparently wasteful and wasted time of eternal intervals and deferrals in the process of making art.

The fruit of a four-year process of exploring what happens in the mind through observing what goes on in the studio, this series developed into an installation that situates viewers in a recreated studio itself where they are both audience and protagonists. He listens to an echo of himself,

though the viewers and the protagonists themselves are unable to decipher which of the figures would be the 'real' self, and which the 'echo'.

In this series, objects are anthropomorphised as characters, such as the filmic camera on a tripod and a sousaphone on a moving armchair that rolls around the space. The conic shape of the sousaphone recalls the many loudspeakers that are found throughout Kentridge's oeuvre, ever since his earliest films where the 'capitalist' in a pin-striped suit, Soho Eckstein, imparts orders and directives to masses of labourers (*Johannesburg 2nd Greatest City after Paris*, 1989), drawings and etchings such as his 1998 *Man with Megaphone* and *Man with Megaphone Cluster* (figs p. 256) and the more recent large *Drawing for Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot (2 Private Thoughts)* of 2021 (fig. pp. 260–261). The instrument that amplifies the voice is both the master's voice (as in the Gramophone record label *His Master's Voice* with a dog listening to a phonograph) and the voice of protestors chanting through hand-held loudspeakers in streets. Of his project *Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot*, Kentridge has stated, "The studio is also an enlarged head, a chamber for thoughts and reflections where all the drawings, photos and detritus on the walls become these thoughts."³ The idea of seemingly aimless wandering around the studio, which is, however, a prerequisite for any creative work, was first formulated by Kentridge in the drawing *Parcours d'Atelier* (2007, fig. p. 257).

Kentridge's art is rooted in South Africa, where he continues to live and create most of his work. It stems from "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",⁴ both singularly and

collaboratively. His is “an elegiac yet humorous art that explores the possibilities of poetry in contemporary society, even in the absence of utopian visions for the future. He provides an acerbic commentary on our society, while proposing a way of seeing life as a continuous process of change and uncertainty rather than as a controlled world of facts.”⁵ Kentridge’s art has always “explored 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.”⁶ And the margins listen to echoes coming from distant cultural centres, as well as they develop unique, new voices, whose power lies precisely in marginality, which allows for a certain amount of experimental freedom.

This recent series of nine, 30-minute episodes is also an experiment in embodiment and phenomenological experience in the digital age and a reflection on what might happen in the brain and in the studio of an artist, today, confronted with digitalisation of life. Filming of the series began during the first lockdown of the 2020–2022 Covid-19 pandemic in Kentridge’s Johannesburg studio and continued in its aftermath, completed in 2023. The studio mimicked the closed spaces of Covid, and, in the Venice 2024 exhibition, the works were viewed in a unique concentrated environment that partially recreated it, screened on devices ranging from a small phone to a large flat screen.

These films, originally intended for online, mobile or television viewing, are a hymn to artistic freedom, while ominously revealing the lack of freedom typical of our enclosed spaces in the digital era. They also foreground how the activity of mark-making with materials constructs the self in the process of making. Furthermore, the exploration of the relationship between painting and musical scores, as well as between dance and drawing, becomes a form of mental gymnastics or yoga for the brain. They are exercises to expand and improve human intelligence in our era where the prosthetics of AI and the increasing use of social media ultimately and dangerously atrophy our cognitive and emotional abilities.

Subjectivity today is characterised by forms of narcissistic melancholy, due to the ‘selfie’ nature of digital media and its distracted character (from ‘dis-trahere’, to pull in another direction) as we move away from one message and fragment of data to another, endlessly forgetting while ‘remembering’ easily thanks to a slew of satellites above our heads. This hybrid aspect – fractured while seamlessly omnipotent – is echoed by the double nature of Kentridge’s

collages in this series. His alter egos and doppelgängers debate a series of issues: how does memory work? What makes the self? One might interpret this as a reversal of the obsessive narcissistic split personalities of our era of avatars on social media into forms of quiet psychoanalysis.

While the doubling of two or more images of the artist is seamless, sophisticated and perfectly rendered digitally (a homage to early 20th-century film experiments with double exposures), Kentridge opts for an overall choppy editing of different scenes in the studio, during the day or at night.⁷ These disjunctures and cuts switch our attention from one thought or scene to another, echoing our fractured, rushing selves, unable to stop the rubble and detritus of data from piling up. We smile, however, each time a little group of benevolent paper rats comes onto the scene.

Most viewing today is episodic in nature, with online series accompanying and punctuating people’s lives generally and when they log on and off the internet. In parallel to this, Kentridge enacted and recorded the episodic nature of life in the studio over the years between 2020 and 2023: he reflected upon the studio life as a form of unpredictable movements and thoughts, in contrast with the apparent coherence and logic of the machinic ChatGPT essay, a form of perfectly logical babble that is training and reprogramming the human through AI.

Episode 1 – A Natural History of the Studio refers to Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis historia* from AD 77. It is an introduction to the overall argument of the series that focuses on how procedures inside the studio may provide insights into processes in the world outside. The coffee pot drawn on the wall becomes a large jug drawn by Morandi. The word *Torschlusspanik* (panic caused by the feeling that opportunities are slipping away once decisions are made, as if doors are being closed) appears, followed by a nurse wearing a mask, reminding us of Covid – where the doors were literally closed during the lockdown. The studio walls are covered in words – “wait”, “breathe”, “hold” – amongst the tools of the studio. The video progresses through what is said and what is seen, the voice and the eye, the sounaphone and the camera, and regresses magically when footage is reversed so that images appear revealed rather than drawn. The artist describes the inevitability of the coffee pot emerging in the drawing, as if it were impossible to escape drawing the ordinary.

The dialectic is thus between infinite possibility and the inevitability of the result. Sitting at his table, Kentridge states that an “interview is conducted at 11.25 a.m.,” while

another image of himself appears on the left of the screen and sits at the same table, contradicting the Kentridge in front of him, accusing him of having engaged in “procrastination”, while the Kentridge on the right of the screen tells him that it was “productive procrastination”. A third Kentridge comes onto the scene, and then a fourth, so the studio is like the inside of a brain populated by many selves that may be in conflict with each other, even to the point of open confrontation, as depicted in the works *I Look in the Mirror, I Know What I Need* (2024, figs pp. 274–275). A collage of memories, including excerpts from early works, appear, as well as images ranging from scenes of violence in Apartheid South Africa, bodies, dead animals, making love, soldiers with guns, an industrial mining landscape, all jumbled together. The contemporaneous presence of different levels of thoughts that are in contradiction with each other turn Pliny’s well-organised *Natural History* upside down. Ultimately, the simultaneous presence of historical, biographical, logical-linguistic, material and personal elements holds together the divided self through self-mockery and a light absurdity.

In *Episode 2 – Self-Portrait of a Coffee-Pot* the main topic here is the making of a self-portrait as a way of coming to know oneself. What becomes known is that the self is nothing other than the process of that search, which is the dance of life, with no finished result.

Episode 3 – Vanishing Points investigates how memory is connected to place. The scene opens onto two large blank sheets of paper on the wall. On the left, the artist draws a fictional colonial landscape with water and mountains, like those he remembers hanging in his childhood dining room, while his double on the right draws what he remembers actually seeing on the outskirts of Johannesburg – a harsh mining landscape full of dangerous empty shafts, where informal economy workers of today descend to dig out leftovers of gold in the abandoned mines (cf. p. 136).

In *Episode 4 – Finding One’s Fate* through remembering the story his father told him when he was a child, of Perseus killing his grandfather Acrisius by accident, Kentridge formulates a theory of the accident, the inescapability of one’s destiny and its unpredictability. This artwork becomes both a desperate and an optimistic attempt to exercise the mind and the body by making art, training our abilities to live with no clear predictions of our fate.

Why do we suspend judgement when interpreting an image as truthful, at face value? This question lies at the core of *Episode 5 – As If* where Kentridge walks across the paper

screen of an open notebook as *if* he were a horse. On the title page, we also see a photograph of the ancient Laocoon sculpture, and another image of a horse. The studio becomes a place for making up worlds and images. Kentridge paints abstract marks over objects in the studio, furniture and the walls, until from one point of view they coalesce into the words “SMOKE”, “ASHES”, “FABLE”. The lesson suddenly makes sense: if we understand that points of view are always provisional, we might avoid the fate of the Trojans, who ignored the warning of the priest Laocoon that the Greeks’ gift of a large wooden horse was not sincere.

Episode 6 – A Harvest of Devotion foregrounds rehearsals in the studio for Kentridge’s *The Head & the Load* (2018). Here, he proposes that we understand history as a collage of fragments rather than as a sequence of objective facts. The title refers to the hopes of African soldiers serving in European armies in Africa during the First World War, to receive a harvest for their devotion to the colonial powers and their war, in which a tremendously high number of African lives were lost. In this episode, the *Ursonate* (1923/1932) of Kurt Schwitters is used as a way of speaking about the European collapse of rationalist modern thinking into confusion and war.

Episode 7 – Metamorphosis focuses on transformation. Here, sounds are visualised through the attempt to paint them; a shadow turns into a sculpture, time morphs into a film strip, an abstract blotch becomes an image. The Greek origin of the word metamorphosis (‘meta’, beyond, ‘morphé’, form) implies an evolution to a freer state. Here mimetic bird vocalisations echo and reverse the collapse of human language and logic into war shown in the preceding episode into a magical viewing experience.

Episode 8 – Oh To Believe in Another World speaks about how one can continue to live and practice art in the gaps between visionary historical periods characterised by shared utopian ideals, and how we might recover that utopian impulse, even though we need ways to avoid its catastrophic authoritarian enforcement. Kentridge raises these issues by documenting the making of his film *Oh To Believe in Another World* (2022, figs pp. 214–217), which references the Soviet Union after the revolution during Stalin’s dictatorship through the balancing act performed by composer Dmitri Shostakovich to stay alive through the purges (cf. p. 204). The suggestion is that when living in a world of puppets and puppeteers, we must negotiate forms of limited freedom. In this film, our own times come back through the reference to digital editing technology:

the green screen is perhaps the most poignant visual image and metaphor for the invisible regime that haunts our times, piling fictions upon fictions in a world turned into a videogame metaverse.

Finally, the series ends with *Episode 9 – In Defence of Optimism* with a procession out of the studio and down the streets of Johannesburg. This last episode is about the optimism of making things, about how, even in extreme circumstances, there will be people who play, make art, sing. The episode begins with a playful film in reverse. There are sounds of crickets in the garden, rays of sunlight coming into the studio, rats made of crinkled paper who paint over a drawing of peonies. Tears become repairs. This reversal is an affirmation that although there may be no understanding in the present, that which happens later clarifies that which happened before. It is only in this final episode that Kentridge's two split parts integrate for a moment, come to an agreement, with one announcing, “We are working”. One Kentridge affirms on behalf of his other self that play and work can be unified, art is a space of unalienated labour, made alone or with others. There is art and poetry in dark times not because of ignorance of the world, nor out of blindness and insensibility, but because they resist those circumstances and give meaning to life.

1 The exhibition was held 15–27 April 1985. Samantha James: *Powerful Imagery of Haunted World in Charcoal, The Star* (26 April 1985). Italics by the author.

2 At Arsenale Institute for the Politics of Representation, Venice, 17 April–24 November 2024, the exhibition was curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. The installation was subsequently shown at Hauser & Wirth, New York, 1 May–1 August 2025 within a broader solo exhibition by the artist titled *A Natural History of the Studio*.

3 In conversation with the author, first published in: *William Kentridge. Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot*, exhib. cat. Arsenale Institute for the Politics of Representation / The Office Performing Arts, Venice 2024, ed. by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (Zurich: Lengenhagger Druck, 2024), p. 3. This essay derives from and expands that publication.

4 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *William Kentridge*, Brussels 1998 (also exhib. cat. Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, Brussels 1998), p. 9.

5 Ibid., p. 9, quoted from the revised version in Christov-Bakargiev 2024 (as in note 3).

6 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev 1998 (as in note 4), p. 10.

7 The editing by Janus Fouché and Žana Marović was done under the advisory of Walter Murch in dialogue with the artist.



Apron, 2023
Bronze, 172 × 127 × 75 cm

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Drawing for Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot
(2 *Private Thoughts*), 2021 (detail)

Indian ink, coloured pencil, charcoal,
pastel and collage on paper, 152×208 cm

Courtesy of Mark and Dana Strong

Exhibited in Essen

Fig. pp. 260–261

Motif page 4:

Walking Man, 2000

Linocut on paper

Image and sheet 248×101.5 cm

Courtesy Kentridge Studio

Exhibited in Dresden (KK)

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