

## Wandering Through the Dictionary

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*William Kentridge: Thick Time*, Whitechapel Gallery until 15<sup>th</sup> January 2017.

'Let the drama begin at the end', declares a page in the middle of William Kentridge's *Second-Hand Reading*, a flipbook film that dances forwards and backwards across overpainted pages of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. A quest for origins runs throughout Kentridge's work. His performance art, true to his years of study under Jacques Lecoq, strives to be aware of the impulses behind every bodily action. His drawings and paintings, themselves examples of such intensely scrutinised actions, are more interested in processes of subtraction – of rubbing out or of washing away – than in accretion. His lean use of language concentrates on the moments when words fracture, through paradox and pun, and imagines alternate linguistic histories outside the limits imposed by dictionaries. And his work in film returns to the age of the silent screen, in black and white, whilst shunning linear narrative.

Such strategies are above all the means for Kentridge to investigate the conditions of his native South Africa, and the experience of living through, and with the legacy of, apartheid. Moving backwards is about never forgetting, and about trying to understand. It is bleakly hopeful as an act of atonement, and there is a sense, with the injunctions to 'unmake', 'unhappen', 'undo', that if we could get back, we could do it all again, better: Kentridge describes this as a utopian desire. But of course the process is continually thwarted, the quest's end forever postponed. Instead we are caught in-between, pushed and pulled about in a world of fragments that is everywhere mediated. Nonetheless, this does do something: it refuses complacency, forcing us to rethink, and to feel. As with Antonin Artaud, whose imaginary spectacles Kentridge's work seems to bring to life, the aim is a reinvention of catharsis, with the potential to change both us and the world.

*Thick Time* at the Whitechapel Gallery presents work from the last 13 years that combines and combusts these many mediums. The whole is magnificently presented to give maximum possible coherence to an artist who works at the edges of intelligibility. We both enter and exit to the sensory assaults of *The Refusal of Time*, Kentridge's magnum opus. Surrounded by removal boxes and boards, we feel we are somewhere temporary: backstage in a theatre perhaps, or in a shipping office with the crates waiting to export the show to its next destination. But we are also at the heart of something: a syncopated set of bellows dominates the middle of the room, appearing to power the five surrounding video projections, but at the same time obstructing, preventing a panoptic experience of the whole. Our vision, Kentridge keeps reminding us, is always partial.

Staggeringly dense, allusive and elusive imagery is developed and disrupted simultaneously, sequentially, or independently, across the five channels in a fantasia on time and its discontents. The work evolved out of conversations with the historian of science Peter Galison; Kentridge saw it as a challenge to attempt to find visual equivalents for invisible principles, and to explore how science can be generative of art. Science here is both constricting and liberating. We witness the creation of clocks and the drawing of maps; and as we move from laboratories to colonial offices we realise that the work is as much about the politics as the science of time. Calibration colludes with colonial expansion; science and suffering walk hand in hand. Yet the project is continually undermined in its telling, from the frenzied syncopation of metronomes to the dances of Dado Masilo, graceful even in representing an explosion of dynamite. A telling sequence of drawings begins with rows written in binary, which transform into barbed wire, only to be reconfigured finally into the freedom of uncharted constellations. Nineteenth-century science itself offers models of resistance: Kentridge

invokes Henri Poincaré's exploration of unpredictability through invariance; and redemptive returns to the past take their cue from Felix Eberly's notion of a universal cloud of images of the past travelling continually through space. The work's arrival now in the former capital of the British Empire also forms an important part of its backwards journey.

Kentridge makes an appearance in most of his works, filmed as himself, playing a character, or represented in drawings with differing degrees of specificity. The effect is, surprisingly, never egotistical: there is an honesty to his self-representations, a laying bare of the personal involvement in the process of creation. The need for self-disclosure is perhaps heightened by Kentridge's position as a white South African attempting to address the horrors of colonialism. As much as his art seeks to break down divisions he is aware of the dangers that can lie in trying to speak for others. Dressed always in white shirt and black trousers, filming and painting predominantly in white and black, so many components seem to invite readings along racial lines, yet prove resistant to systematic interpretation.

Kentridge wanders through his works, as if not fully in control, commenting on the exploratory and provisional role of artist. But in the context of *The Refusal of Time* such wandering does function as a kind of identification: it echoes the procession of refugees that trudges across the screens in silhouette. As Homi Bhabha writes in his catalogue essay, the footstep is for Kentridge 'a symbol of the collective condition of dispossession and diaspora'. Doubled again, the same procession appears as a brass band, as if triumphantly approaching the end of the long walk to freedom; but the martial and jazz funeral connotations tell a different story, and the transformations continue.

Collaboration is another constant, which leads Kentridge away from himself. The thrilling score by Philip Miller is a key component of *The Refusal of Time*, with a range that extends from regulated pulsing to chaotic grunting and squeaking in its evocation of the mechanics of time. The introduction of jazz extends the exploration of syncopation and variation, and heterophony acts as an aural counterpart for the for the overlapping, distantly related multiplicities on the screens. Music of all the arts has the purest relationship with time; it also offers the possibility here of transcendence of the physical world.

*The Refusal of Time* is an overwhelming, deliberately disorientating experience, and it takes a while to adjust to the comparative intimacy of the rest of the show; but there is continuity, chiefly in the recurring use of readymades, including wheels, megaphones and typewriters, that Kentridge likes to think of as a commedia dell'arte cast, who make their repeated, yet still unpredictable entrances in a further complication of time and space. *O Sentimental Machine*, again a five-channel video installation, employs this machinery of progress to reflect on, and lampoon, Leon Trotsky's notion of the machinal potential in humans, that needs to be trained in order to bring about social change. It follows the fate of a secretary, played in a virtuosic mime by Sue Pam-Grant, who through a regime of typing and exercise, despite tears, transforms into a robot composite, while Trotsky himself, played by the artist alongside archive footage, becomes synonymous with his instruments of control as his head is replaced with a megaphone. It is an absurdist drama in miniature; but, as with all Kentridge's invocations of utopian ideals, it reveals a fascination that extends beyond the satire, and which casts Kentridge's many disruptions and interventions in yet another light: as holding revolutionary potential.

*Right Into Her Arms*, created this year, relates to Kentridge's work in opera, specifically his production of Alban Berg's *Lulu*, which will be coming to London in November. An electrically-powered miniature model theatre presents a violent drama of chase and seduction with the protagonists represented by two dancing boards, onto which Kentridge's expressionist drawings are

projected. The boards are plastered with torn papers, recalling Kurt Schwitters' collages, and the whole is built up as a montage of 20s and 30s radical art with readings from Schwitters' sound poem *Ursonate*, and extracts from the atonal piano music of Anton Webern. The drama is in every aspect one of freedom and control: a liberated liaison proves fatal for both lovers; the 12-tone music, despite its democratising abandonment of the hierarchies of tonality, moves rigidly through its note rows; and the electronic animation of the whole, while extremely complex, reduces the characters to automata.

It is *Second-Hand Reading*, despite its many removes, which presents the strongest hope for transcending the cruelty of political systems. The light jazz of Neo Muyanga's soundtrack, in which he sings in Sesotho of a South African police massacre, and Kentridge's drawn wanderings and wonderings through the dictionary alongside images of a political protest that has ended in the grave, are ungovernably moving. The work communicates essences even as it rejects absolutes: suffering is allowed to transcend the provisionality, and it is this that makes Kentridge a great tragedian. Despite the indeterminacy, there is a concluding message, even if it can be understood only as a wish: 'End with love'.