Confining this show to the Hayward Gallery and the architectural control of its designers holds another level of irony. The South Bank, where the Hayward is located, is part of the ongoing redevelopment of the Thames’ riverside, which has been redefining the social composition and function of London’s inner city. The economic and political forces that are driving this transformation are not unrelated to the forces that are impacting on Tokyo, Seoul or Shanghai. What is certainly a common feature is the shared interest of multinational investors and ambitious architects. Simon Ford and Anthony Davis have analysed the impact of New Labour’s support for the marriage of cultural production and commerce predicting the rise of a new formation of cultural entrepreneurs. Clearly, as cultural producers go, architects have a head start in this new enterprise culture. London, as the world’s oldest metropolis, has a paradigmatic history of urban conflict where social issues of freedom and control are reduced to architectural problems of order and chaos. Generations of architects, enjoying the patronage of the powerful whether they are monarchs, industrialists, the state or multinational companies, have been able to impose their conceits on the public. In all cities a crucial measure of urban freedom is the resistance of the public to architectural control.

8 Text on the wall of the exhibition introducing a project with his Harvard students OMA Rem Koolhaas: Living ICA, London, August 1999.
9 Rem Koolhaas, Cities on the Move, op cit.


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William Kentridge
A process of remembering and forgetting

Tina Sotiriadi

‘A well built city never resists destruction’ reads the sign high up on the ceiling upon entering the William Kentridge exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London. Stirring deep-rooted historical associations, the phrase is a preamble to a whole series of socio-political and historically linked narratives that are to follow.

William Kentridge is one of the best known artists of the contemporary South African art scene. Already having participated in major exhibitions including the Istanbul Biennial, 1995, the Johannesburg Biennials, 1995 and 1997, Documenta X, 1997, this is the first time in Britain that a one-person show was dedicated to his work. Enjoying an especially prolific artistic career, he has worked with theatre, film, opera production and puppetry, among other art forms. However, it was his drawing and film projections that the Serpentine exhibition focused on. Kentridge is an exceptionally talented draughtsman, working with large-scale charcoal and pastel drawings, mainly black and white with the occasional shades of blue and red. His drawing, which he refers to as ‘stone age’ drawing, shares the grimness and political satire of the work of pre-World War II masters, such as Max Beckmann, George Grosz, Kathe Kollwitz, as well as Honoré Daumier and Francisco Goya.

Memory is the central axis in Kentridge’s work. His unique cinematic technique of animating drawing through film leaves traces of the process and records the passage of time, thus contextualising his work well within the domain of history and narrative. It is, in fact, a detailed study of the ‘process’ which consists of filming a drawing, stopping, altering the image through addition or erasure, filming, stopping, re-drawing. It is a continuous re-working of the same drawing and recording each stage of the process, using 16mm film in earlier and 35mm in more recent films. In their jerky, silent, and captioned quality, they are reminiscent of early twentieth century cinema and experimental films of the 1960s.

This idea of the process, as it is experienced in the fluid quality of his drawing technique, is extended onto a continuous overlapping and
...only inside history can a work exist as a value capable of being discussed and judged. Nothing seems to me worse for art than to fall outside its own history, for it is a fall into the chaos where aesthetic values can no longer be perceived.\(^1\)

Kentridge comes from the ‘periphery’ of the art world, from a place so engrossed in its acute historical concerns that it is far removed from current preoccupations of major art ‘centres’ such as London, New York, Berlin, Paris. South Africa’s preoccupations are distinctly different, closely related to the shaping of a new post-colonial, post-apartheid identity.

Kentridge engages with this hybrid, shifting identity within a largely autobiographical context which evolves around the personal dilemmas and tragedies of his two main protagonists, the pin-striped mine owner Soho Eckstein, the symbol of greed and capitalism, and Felix Teitelbaum, the naked artist. According to Kentridge, Soho takes

transformation of images, as a radio takes the form of a cat and a woman mutates into a telephone, while a cafetière reaches the pitches of the earth where miners toil away. An overall postmodernist state of mutation characterises Kentridge’s work. Inside a cross-referential narrative, references to the past are interchanged with the present. The work is flooded with socio-political histories from the colonialist years to the post-apartheid actuality. Its complexity is unique to the particular circumstances of a constantly changing world that is learning to deal with the legacy of its bloody past. The ever-changing landscape, littered with the by-products of industrialism and mining or filled with bodies, is used as a metaphor for the process of both remembering and forgetting the brutal reality and the laws of the apartheid which have stigmatised that part of the world. The importance of all of this is central to discourses on contemporary South African art. According to Milan Kundera,
after his grandfather, a lawyer and Labour Party politician, whereas Felix represents Kentridge himself. It is about their egos and antagonisms as ‘they fight for the hearts and minds of Johannesburg and the affection of Mrs Eckstein’. However, it is difficult to distinguish between the real and the imagined, the autobiographical and the invented, history and fiction. Autobiographical details lie side by side with documentary extracts of the Sharpeville and Soweto shootings, a menacing cast of caricatures dispatch parcel bombs in a complex and unrelenting representation of reality.

The worrying state of relativism that followed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in 1996, when victims and perpetrators came together on the stand, is effectively portrayed with a dominant sense of fragmentation and dislocation in Kentridge’s work. ‘I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain endings’. There is no doubt that Kentridge manages to reflect very effectively the complexity of the current situation in South Africa which is beyond simple explanations or understanding, given a long history of inequity, torture and exploitation.

However, the absence of precision and linearity, the plurality of differing, often contradictory realities, the montage of uncertainties and vacillations, raises interesting questions, especially when it concerns issues of collective and individual responsibility. An ominous pumping heartbeat comes out of Soho’s bed. Soho suffers from ‘the main condition’ and ‘can only be awakened from his coma by an acknowledgement of his immediate responsibility’. Kentridge’s own conflicting emotions towards his characters are perplexing. Soho’s character begins to evoke sympathy, especially near his downfall, whereas Felix’s passivity and mysterious nature render suspicion. In Ubu Tells the Truth Kentridge explores the jigsaw, the conflicting emotions that can co-exist in one person, as well as the fact that bad traits are an inevitability of human nature. There is also a convergence of characters as one becomes the alter ego of the other. In History of the Main Complaint, at the scene of the accident, Soho’s eyes meet and become one with Felix’s, seen on the rear view mirror. It is about shared responsibility but it is put forth in a starkly didactic way. The didactic tone seems to evoke questions of ‘the white man’s guilt’. Perhaps as if to equal ‘the white man’s burden’ in an unequal game of white supremacy and black inferiority, whose dynamics should be traced back to a long history of colonial domination; are we witnessing some hidden neo-colonialist leanings in a dark corner of Kentridge’s head?

But we have to be wary of a zeal for political correctness towards Kentridge. Sadly, there will always be an oppressor and an oppressed and that does not depend on the colour of the skin. It would be interesting to see our reaction if he were a black South African artist confronting us with all that sentimentality and baggage of personal memories. And as far as South Africa is concerned, the ongoing difficulties of reconciling the past with the present will remain a complex reality for yet a good number of years to come.

4 Catherine David and Jean-Francois Chevrier, Poetics, Documenta X the book, CantzVerlag, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1997, p 608.
5 Franz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks (Pluto Press, London, 1986) discusses the ‘epidermalisation’ of inferiority shared by black people, and their inadequacy and dependency in a white world.


Willie Doherty
The Press invented a fable . . .

Joe Linehan

On a Sunday afternoon in January 1972, thirteen-year-old Willie Doherty was walking with thousands of others on a Civil Rights parade in his native city of Derry. He became an eye-witness to an event that was to mark the future artist for the rest of his life. The day became known worldwide as Bloody Sunday when thirteen people were killed as the crowd was fired upon from soldiers sent from Britain. But what happened after the massacre, what particularly influenced Willie Doherty in his subsequent work as a photographic artist, was the lie, orchestrated as ‘the truth’. It was uttered by a military officer from some official ‘information’ department, and appeared on front pages and TV screens: those