

Yvette Greslé

William Kentridge: Thick Time

2017

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3390>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Greslé, Yvette: William Kentridge: Thick Time. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 6 (2017), Nr. 1, S. 261–269. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3390>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://www.necsus-ejms.org/test/william-kentridge-thick-time/>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

William Kentridge: Thick Time

NECSUS 6 (1), Spring 2017: 261–269

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/william-kentridge-thick-time/>

Keywords: exhibition, London, time, Whitechapel Gallery, William Kentridge

William Kentridge: *Thick Time*, curated by Iwona Blazwick at Whitechapel Gallery (London), is a travelling survey exhibition by a major South African artist that brings together six large-scale multimedia installations produced between 2003 and 2016.[1] Images and sounds propel me visually, sonically, and spatially across time and continents. I walk through the exhibition for the first time and cross a threshold into the immersive multimedia environment that is *The Refusal of Time* (2012). As I stand within the visual and sonic space of the work, I register the historical-temporal entanglements that exist between South African visual archives in art and theatre, and the European avant-garde: Dada; Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896); the work of Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd. In *The Refusal of Time* banal, domestic objects such as baths and showers are props in improbable scenarios. Characters, detached from specific times and places, in hand-drawn cut and paste interiors, make ludicrous decisions as they act out scenarios that yield only existential instability and uncertainty. Reminiscent of Dada, an actor clothed in an absurd, enormous ball shape with cut-outs for head, hands, and feet might topple over at any time. The aesthetic, images, and ideas related to Russian Constructivism is present in Kentridge's work through colour (notably black and red); in the visual language of collage; in the performative gestures and sonic histories of dispossession and struggle; in the iconography and communicative possibilities (or limitations) of sound-objects such as megaphones; and futuristic machinery that promise progress yet in practice yield neither justice, equality, or even practical function.

Following the sensory immersion of *The Refusal of Time* the viewer walks into the more contemplative space of a reading room, situated in proximity to the flipbook film *Second-hand Reading* (2013). The reading room is surrounded on either wall by three large-scale tapestries. A substantial multi-

authored exhibition catalogue was published for the occasion of the exhibition at Whitechapel and is available to read.[2] A staircase leads visitors from the reading room to a number of large-scale installations. These are: *7 Fragments for Georges Méliès* (2003), comprised of an installation of seven films shown with the moving image pieces *Day for Night* and *Journey to the Moon*; *Right Into Her Arms* (2016), a model theatre construction with sound, projected images, drawings, and props; and the immersive environment *O Sentimental Machine* (2015), a work that re-imagines aspects of the archive of Leon Trotsky. The collaborative aspects of Kentridge's practice is made explicit in a short film of the artist speaking about the show (also available [online](#)).



Fig. 1: Installation view of the Reading Room, William Kentridge: *Thick Time*, Whitechapel Gallery, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Whitechapel Gallery.

Thick Time includes Kentridge's ongoing exploration of stop-motion animation techniques and the layered processes of drawing and erasure.[3] As Rosalind Krauss comments in her notable essay 'The Rock' (2000): 'critics have not failed to describe the experience of Kentridge's work in terms of the palimpsest'.[4] In her introduction, Krauss notes a tension within South African discourse which relates to the artist and apartheid.[5] Her essay takes its title from Kentridge's own articulation (in 1990) of apartheid as an 'immovable rock':

[t]hese two elements – our 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. [6]

In this review, as a viewer who is also South African, I engage the tension between the ‘tyranny of our history’ and the making of work that resists the spectacle of apartheid and didactic, authoritarian modes of representation. The visual and sonic languages that Kentrige deploys, similar to other artists of his generation in South Africa, is sensate, affective, murky, and ambiguous.[7] As I stand in the space of *The Refusal of Time*, I hear Kentrige’s voice as he recounts personal memories and invokes mythical narratives of mortality, transience, and an eternity far beyond the world itself. Imagery speaks not only to the mysteries of time, the cosmos, outer space, and eternities that evade our grasp and into which we will disappear, but also the scientific and bureaucratic machineries that have functioned to fuel social and political violence in the name of civilisation and progress. Moving image sequences that include absurd theatrical scenarios performed by the artist and actors undo any attempt to order everyday life and history itself into tidy, legible, temporal categories. Simultaneously, the found materials of colonial documents and maps open up a space for an exploration of the artist’s particular encounter with historical events and archives.[8]

Kentrige utters the words ‘to undo’, ‘to un-remember’, and associations are prompted. I recognise personal regret but also larger narratives that exist in the historical, social, or political sphere. Can these ever be undone? Kentrige registers his presence both through his voice and through animated drawings or filmed performances. He literally inhabits the internal life of the visual and sonic worlds he imagines. He is present in all of their sensations, affects, competing narratives, tensions, ambiguities, and complicities. Yet, in 1990, when Kentrige says ‘our history’, who inhabits this space of collectivity indicated by the possessive determiner ‘our’? When he inserts his body into his work and I, as a viewer, read this representation and its relationship to the bodies, maps, sounds, images, and texts that populate the work, is it possible to maintain a sense of an ‘our’? I navigate this exhibition and its re-imagining of visual and sonic archives that have multiple sites and that are intimately related to a sense of place (South Africa) and yet simultaneously unmoored from any one location, geography, or moment in time. How am I, as a viewer,

encountering the idea of the thickness of time (and indeed the thickness of place) through the work and my own subjective navigation of it?



Fig. 2: William Kentridge, *The Refusal of Time*, 2012, Five-channel video projection, colour, sound, 4 megaphones, breathing machine, 30 minutes. Made in collaboration with Phillip Miller, Catherine Meyburgh, Dada Masilo, and Peter Galison. Installation View, *Thick Time*, Whitechapel Gallery, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Whitechapel Gallery.

The Refusal of Time is a pulsating multimedia environment. It was made in collaboration with the choreographer and dancer Dada Masilo; the composer and sound artist Philip Miller; the filmmaker, projection designer, director, and editor Catherine Meyburgh; and the historian of science Peter Galison. Kentridge's collaboration with Miller was formally initiated when the composer wrote the score for Kentridge's film *Felix in Exile* in 1993. Miller's sound collages weave together musical scores, spoken word, and found sound. Both Miller and Kentridge produce sensations, associations, emotions, and affects that are akin to psychic processes of remembering, forgetting, and making sense (or non-sense) of historical, social, political, and cultural worlds. I enter a darkened space as if onto a stage and am immersed in sounds which produce multiple affective registers. I hear music, breath, spoken word, languages, utterances, and accents that are familiar to me. Images (the work includes a five-channel video projection) move and flicker along the walls. Human figures move, dance, mime, appear, and disappear; various staged scenarios are absurd, chaotic, or banal. A monumental wooden contraption

named 'a breathing machine' is at the centre of this sensation-world. Chairs are scattered around it and I sit and contemplate its presence within this space. The 'breathing machine' brings the biological processes of human and non-human animals, the biological mechanics of the lung, into a relationship with technological objects. Breath is essential for life but life, and the breath that pulsates through living bodies, can also be compromised through illness or violence in its many forms (whether this violence is inflicted physically, psychically or emotionally).



Fig. 3: William Kentridge, *The Refusal of Time*, 2012, Five-channel video projection, colour, sound, 4 megaphones, breathing machine, 30 minutes. Made in collaboration with Phillip Miller, Catherine Meyburgh, Dada Masilo, and Peter Galison. Installation View, *Thick Time*, Whitechapel Gallery, 2017. Image courtesy the artist and Whitechapel Gallery.

As I inhabit and move around the densely-textured visual and aural space of *The Refusal of Time*, I experience euphoria attached to something that registers through 'feeling' and that is creatively and aesthetically beautiful and transformative. I also experience the unpleasant sensations of inhabiting the space as a viewer who is marked by a personal relationship to South Africa and the historical, social, and political conditions of apartheid as a woman classified white by the apartheid state. Simply by virtue of being classified white – which is not to negate the impact of apartheid patriarchy on women more broadly, or to undermine the possibilities of friendship and love across the racial boundaries actively policed by the apartheid state – automatic privileges were granted which were denied to women classified black, coloured,

or Indian. In a 2009 article published in the South African newspaper *Mail & Guardian* the South African scholar and writer Njabulo Ndebele draws attention to the political-affective charge of apartheid in South Africa:

the existence of [...] a collective space of anguish may have to be recognised and acknowledged as the one feature in our public and private lives that has the potential to bind us. Beyond that it is vital to recognise that, being in that space, South Africans may not hold the same quantum of responsibility and accountability. [9]

The South African feminist scholar Pumla Gqola brings into view the question of accountability and responsibility in the aftermath of sustained historical racial violence, critiquing the glib promise of the Rainbow Nation:

rainbowism is evoked at specific points where a certain kind of non-racialism, though not necessarily anti-racism, needs to be stressed. We are not always rainbow people, only some of the time when the need arises. [10]

My looking is underpinned too by the ethics and politics of feminist thought and Sara Ahmed's work on the political-affective dynamics of bodies as they navigate spaces that, far from neutral, are sites of contestation, unease, violence, and the enactment of power (which can be overt or more insidious and opaque).[11] History is alive in the makers of sounds, spaces, and images and the heterogeneous viewers and bodies that encounter these and interpret them in their own ways. The South African scholar Nomusa Makhubu engages distinctions made between black and white artists who embody different relationships to apartheid and its memory. She notes: '[t]he term "Black" carries historical political weight (one does not speak of White art for instance, as it is presumed to be mainstream cultural production).'[12] What do Kentridge's collaborations with artists and cultural producers racialised as black look like and feel like in the decades designated 'post-apartheid'? Who holds the economic, social, and cultural power in these exchanges and how does creative and intellectual agency operate? Who are the major audiences of Kentridge's work? There are aspects to the work that would have particular meaning to South African viewers who are fluent in the languages that many of the songs are performed in. In this sense, what are the social and political dynamics at play in the white artist's staging of the linguistic and cultural life of the black artist against the backdrop of a historical condition of alienation and exclusion?

In one moment in *The Refusal of Time*, Kentridge repetitively and urgently moves chairs, one in front of the other, as if to catch the footsteps of Masilo

who walks from one chair to the next, arms at either side. She looks impassively ahead of her. Simultaneously, in an adjacent projection, Masilo performs cartwheels behind Kentridge as he walks. He gestures with one arm as he focuses on a book held in the other hand. He appears to read out loud. On a projection on the opposite wall Kentridge walks, slightly hunched, with Masilo on his back. I hear Kentridge's voice as he, quite literally, counts time. I also hear a sound-collage of wind instruments, operatic sounds, and utterances that suggest specifically black South African linguistic forms, which differ in complex ways across multiple languages and that are not contextualised in the exhibition texts. Where Kentridge and Masilo are in place, space, and time is rendered opaque even as maps appear and disappear in relation to the figures. *The Refusal of Time* deploys the iconography of colonial map-making and Kentridge's dialogue with Galison engages the politics and power relations that mark the histories of time from the emergence of Greenwich Mean Time to mapping, colonial expansion, and war. In apartheid South Africa even birth within the country's borders ensured neither citizenship nor dignity to those who were not classified white. Legislation curtailed even the most basic rights of movement, habitation, and work. The process of map-making and the setting of internal borders and boundaries was ideological.

As I watch the scenarios performed by Masilo and Kentridge I see a man and a woman, racialised as white and black respectively, acting out encounters that are also gendered. To what extent are images embedded within historical modes of representation recycled in ways that perpetuate and reinscribe power relations that are gendered and racialised (even as their authors claim critical distance)? I see the authoritative white, male figure who walks and gestures with his book as the black woman performs childlike cartwheels. I see the white man carrying the black woman on his back; perhaps he performs the hero, perhaps he is weighed down by history, or perhaps she is the childlike figure in need of saving. I see an expansion of the trope of the gentleman with the chair – although here the inflection is deliberately absurd, as Masilo walks rather than sits. Who is the author of these scenarios that confront historical, racialised, and gendered relations, acting them out, repeating them, and exaggerating them for critical (or perhaps ironic) purpose? Is it Masilo or is it Kentridge, and how would this inform its significance?

While the exhibition insists on the collaborative aspect of the work I was left feeling that its positioning as William Kentridge: Thick Time ultimately downplays this and authorship is, at times, ambiguous. In my own subjective

encounter with the work the idea of time and its thickness as it relates to colonial and apartheid archives, and the enactment of memory, brought about particular associations, feelings, and tensions. Time, as the exhibition demonstrates so powerfully, is not simply an elusive, invisible, or abstract concept – it has a life that, historically, has been given material form in both image and sound. Time is embedded in relations of power; it is historical, political, and ideological. Imagined through the lens of memory, time has a particular relationship to historical trauma, what Griselda Pollock articulates as ‘trauma’s no-time-space’.[13] As I occupy the sensate, moving worlds imagined as Thick Time, I experience the power of memory on a personal scale – the ‘rock’ of apartheid. I also experience the affective power of sounds and images that leave me, in the moment of experiencing them, with feelings that are transformative. I think of the euphoria I experienced as I viewed Masilo’s powerful dance performance set to Miller’s sound-collage, as she moves, swirling, amongst torn fragments of paper. Kentridge’s Thick Time speaks powerfully to the historical, political, and geographical entanglements that exist between Britain and former colonies, which includes the imposition of artificial borders through ideological and imaginary processes of map-making. There are multiple routes through which to navigate this exhibition which brings temporality, history, place, and subjectivity into a unique relation.

Yvette Greslé (University of Johannesburg)

References

- Ahmed, S. *Living a feminist life*. Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Bennett, J. ‘Face-to-face Encounters’ in *Empathic vision: Affect, trauma, and contemporary art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005: 103-123.
- Blazwick, I. and Breitwieser, S (eds). *William Kentridge: Thick time*. London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016.
- Christov-Bakargiev, C. *William Kentridge*. Brussels: Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1998.
- Cameron, D., Christov-Bakargiev, C., and Coetzee, J.M (eds). *William Kentridge*. London: Phaidon Press, 1999.
- Dubow, J. and Rosengarten, R. ‘History as the Main Complaint: William Kentridge and the making of Post-Apartheid South Africa’, *Art History*, Vol. 27, No. 4, September 2004: 671-690.
- Garb, T., Enwezor, O., Vladislavić, I. *Home lands, land marks: Contemporary art from South Africa*. London: Haunch of Venison, 2008.
- Garb, T., Fer, B., Koerner, J.L., Krčma, E., and Pollock, G. *William Kentridge and Vivienne Koorland: Conversations in letters and lines*. Chicago: Reaktion Books, 2017.
- Greslé, Y. ‘Ephemeral and site-specific encounters with the Freud Museum (London): Penny Siopis’s “Three Essays on Shame”’ in *Critical addresses: The archive-in-process*, edited by L. Farber and C. Jorgensen. *Johannesburg: Jacana Media*, 2016: 125-137.

- *Precarious video: Historical events, trauma and memory in South African video art* (Jo Ractliffe, Penny Siopis, Berni Searle and Minnette Vári), PhD dissertation. London: University College London, 2015: <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1470845/>.
- Godby, M. 'Memory and history in William Kentridge's History of the Main Complaint' in *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa*, by S. Nuttall and C. Carli Coetzee. Oxford University Press Southern Africa, 1998.
- Gqola, P. 'Defining people: Analysing power, language and representation in metaphors of the New South Africa', *Transformation*, #47, 2001: 94-106, 100.
- Koerner, M.K. 'Death, Time and Soup: A Conversation with William Kentridge and Peter Gallison', *The New York Review*, 30 June 2012: <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/06/30/kentridge-galison-refusal-of-time/>.
- Krauss, R. "'The Rock": William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection', *October*, #92, Spring 2000: 3-35.
- Makhubu, N. 'Race and the anxieties of cultural obscurity: Meditations on blackness in South African performance and video art', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 16, #1, 2012: 42-53, 42.
- Ndebele, N. 'Of pretence and protest', *Mail & Guardian*, 23 September 2009: <https://mg.co.za/article/2009-09-23-of-pretence-and-protest>.
- Pollock, G. *After-affects/after-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013: 2.
- Wroe, N. 'Out of South Africa: how politics animated the art of William Kentridge', *The Guardian*, 10 September 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/10/out-of-south-africa-how-politics-animated-the-art-of-william-kentridge>.

Notes

- [1] The exhibition William Kentridge: Thick Time, organised by Whitechapel Gallery and Museum der Moderne Salzburg, will travel to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (16 February-18 June 2017); to Museum der Moderne Salzburg (29 July-5 November 2017) and The Whitworth, The University of Manchester (21 September 2018-3 March 2019).
- [2] See Blazwick & Breitwieser 2016.
- [3] See the earlier literature: Godby 1998, pp. 100-111; Cameron & Christov-Bakargiev & Coetzee 1999; Dubow & Rosengarten 2004; Bennett 2005, pp. 103-123; Garb & Enwezor & Vladislavić 2008. See also the more recent literature. Tamar Garb curated William Kentridge and Vivienne Koorland: Conversations in Letters and Lines at The Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh. The exhibition, which ran from 9 November 2016 to 19 February 2017, is accompanied by a book. See Garb & Fer & Koerner & Krčma & Pollock 2017.
- [4] Krauss 2000, pp. 3-35, 21.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [6] Krauss cites from Christov-Bakargiev 1998, p. 75. See Krauss 2000, p. 4.
- [7] See Greslé 2015.
- [8] See for example Greslé 2016, pp 125-137.
- [9] Ndebele 2009.
- [10] Gqola 2001.
- [11] Ahmed 2017.
- [12] Makhubu 2012.
- [13] Pollock 2013, p. 2.