

Readings/Rereadings

Remember, You Are an Artist, Not a Scholar. Six Drawing Lessons by William Kentridge

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The extraordinary endeavour of William Kentridge is the testimony of an intense, many years and productive work that relates to the dynamics of a complexity located in the cultural and political context of belonging, so being able to interpret it means being confronted with a visual universe capable of reflecting a precise personal need, in privileging the medium of drawing and in the freedom to hybridize it with cinema and theatre.

The artist was born in Johannesburg in 1955 and his Jewish origins date back to his paternal family. The Kantorowicz, in fact, left Lithuania to escape the racial persecutions of the Russian empire in the late nineteenth century and, once arrived in South Africa, modified the surname adapting it to the English-speaking sounds. But although the progress of the history seems to overturn the social roles of the protagonists, being whites does not mean living the abomination of apartheid as passive spectators. "Moving from the status of a persecuted minority to that of a privileged elite is an ideal condition for demonstrating the arbitrary basis of racism" [Burgio 2014, p. 12] [1]. This is what William Kentridge's parents are proposing to do, as lawyers defending black rights.

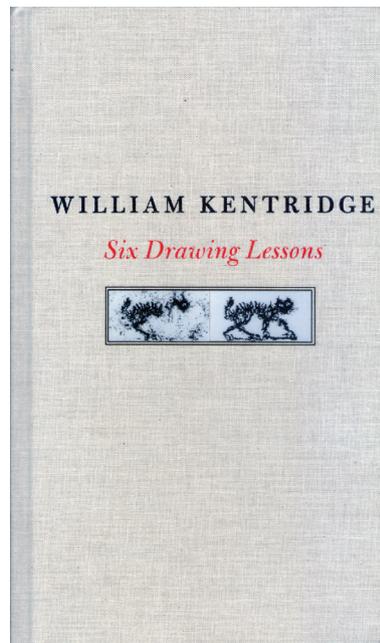


Fig. 1. Cover of the first English edition [Kentridge 2014] and Italian edition [Kentridge 2016].

On 21 March 1960, during a peaceful demonstration organised by the PAC [2] in the Sharpeville township –to protest against the government’s Urban Areas Act, which required black citizens to show a proof document of their right to enter white-only areas, and for work purposes only [3]– police shot at a crowd of demonstrators, including in the back. 67 people were killed, 186 wounded and 18011 arrested [Pelliccioni 1972, p. 655]. Sydney Kentridge assumed a pivotal role in assisting some of the victims’ families and later made headlines for his trial of the Steve Biko’s suspected cause of death, founder of the *Black Consciousness* student movement, who had led the Soweto protests against the segregationist government.

The arrest of 18 August 1977 was the last of many: the story ended with the death of the activist, occurred on 12 September of the same year. As for the motives, the prison police stated that they were induced by a hunger strike, but the reality of the facts showed that he was repeatedly tortured, so when lawyer Kentridge questioned Lieutenant-Colonel Pieter J. Goosen, asking him what right he had to keep a man in chains for 48 hours, the debate unfolded in the following dialectical ways: “Goosen: I have the full power to do it. Prisoners could attempt suicide or escape. Kentridge: Let’s have an honest answer – where did you get your powers? Goosen: It is my power. Kentridge: Are you people above the law? Goosen: I have full powers to ensure a man’s safety. Kentridge: I am asking for the statute. Goosen: We don’t work under statutes. Kentridge: Thank you very much. That is what we have always suspected” [Parker, Mokhesi-Parker 1998, p. 56].

In a family context in which his parents assume *super partes* roles in the defence of the person rights –regardless of the ethnic group to which he belongs–, William Kentridge grows up and is formed, recording the traumatic memories of a liberation process decidedly oriented towards a decolonial politics that reflects on the most intimate meaning of the term ‘power’, questioning its declinations in a direct and crossed relationship between the noun and the verb. The first approach to racism is precocious and decidedly shocking, because it goes back to the time of the Sharpeville massacre, when, at only six years old, curious about a yellow box placed on his father’s desk, convinced to find chocolates inside, he furtively opens it and sees photographs of dismembered and headless cadavers [Kentridge 2005, p. 99].

“These documentary images, with their scientific apparatus of notes, diagrams, and arrows, would often return to the artist’s imagery. The reference to the document will bring a strong stock of social denunciation” [Burgio 2014, p. 14] [4].

After graduating from the Witwatersrand University in 1976 with a degree in political science, William Kentridge pursued his passion for drawing by enrolling in printmaking and engraving courses at the Johannesburg Art Foundation. In 1981 he decided to attend the *École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq*. His studies led him to work in the cinema and theatre, including as an actor, director and set designer.

One of the most significant and recognised artists in the world, in 2012 he was invited by Harvard University to give a series of conferences, and the contents of the prestigious

Charles Eliot Norton Lectures were collected, integrated, and published two years later by the same author.

The introduction to the *Six Drawing Lessons* book opens with the enthusiastic announcement made to his father, by telephone, about the invitation and the response received: “do you have anything to say? [...] and now you have that honor. You don’t have to accept” [Kentridge 2014, p. 3]. The preparatory work is complex and focuses on the specific themes of an artistic practice that problematizes the origins of the available mediums, giving new life to obsolete technologies that are reshaped and updated, in a sort of criticism of the processes of recession and censorship in South Africa in which he was formed. Therefore, the drawing becomes a political manifesto of an anachronistic and involuntary impediment, in being in synchrony with the times of a changing world. It is an act of denunciation that forces one to break down and recompose the text and the image of a falsified media support, on which to write the animated drawing of a credible story that highlights the gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions of a dilated present, in such a way as to anticipate the trajectories of a possible future, the course of which, since the nineties, has begun to be glimpsed.

A series of sentences summarise the recurrent thoughts of one’s existence. They are synthetic notes written in sequence, on a sheet of paper to be cut up and divided into six parts, to compose a collage from which to extrapolate the textual cues necessary to formulate the lessons contents (fig. 2).

The imperative is always the same: focus on the primacy of the image in order to go back to the idea behind it.

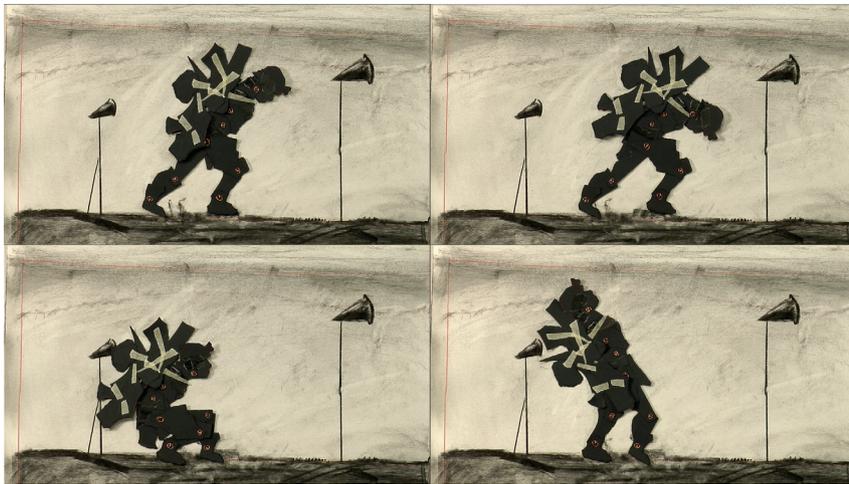
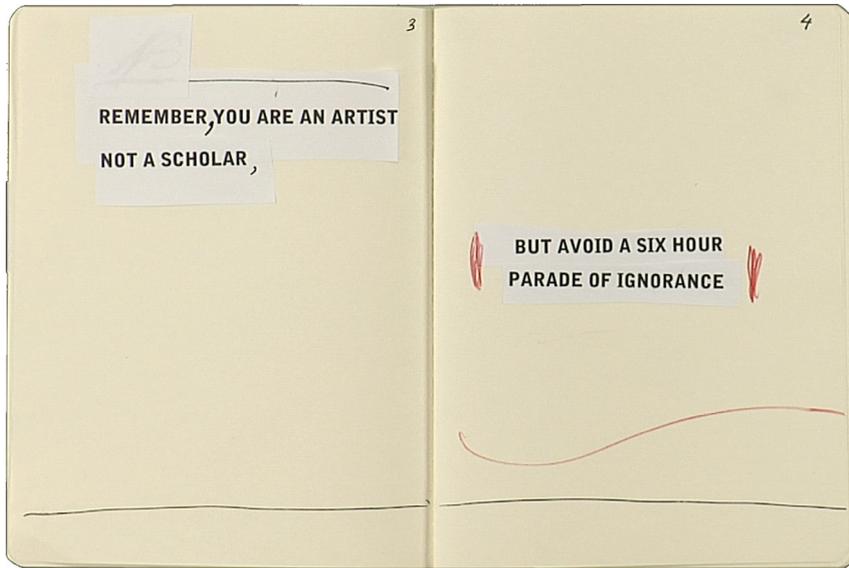


Fig. 2. William Kentridge, notebook collage from the preparatory notes of the six lessons, 2012. © William Kentridge.

Fig. 3. William Kentridge, drawing with paper puppet. First lesson, 2012. © William Kentridge.

For what concern the first lecture, entitled *In Praise of Shadows*, it starts with the projection of a film in the auditorium, made in 1999 for the Istanbul Biennial. It is *Shadow Procession*. Small fragments of black paper portray the articulated shapes of characters and objects connected by iron wires, manually moved in a sort of puppet theatre in which every single pose is meticulously programmed and photographed, in stop motion, away from a trip with no destination. Drawing and movement are a practice of thought, but also physical actions that force the artist to move away from his images in order to photograph them and resume work immediately afterwards, in an alternation of continuous movements [Maltz-Leca 2013, pp. 139-140].

Since the image, whether static or in motion, is always the result of an artistic operation, travelling backwards to verify the real adherence of the message conveyed with the idea that originated it means revealing the entire construction process. And so, we start very far back and arrive at Plato's *Republic* of 360 B.C., in the moment when, in the seventh book, the allegory of the cave is faced. Socrates describes the prisoners chained to their feet, and neck that cannot move, forced to look ahead in a process of questioning the truth of existence, made credible by the projections of their shadows [Maltese 2015, pp. 249-251]. In the black ones, of the represented cortège, Kentridge's challenge is to achieve the minimum degree of recognisability of the subjects that produced them: travellers directed no one knows where, "miners carrying a broken city, pensioners carried in a wheelbarrow. An inventory of specific

people seen in newspapers and the news, or on the streets of Johannesburg” [Kentrige 2014, p. 9] (fig. 3). In a dialogical inversion of the themes of the first lesson, the second lesson intercepts the cultural geographies of a return journey, the salient stages of which are marked by the timing of the memories that pass through the tortuous passage from darkness to light, in piecing together the fragments and interrupted possibilities of a brief history of the colonial uprisings.

The photographic projection and the device that originates it are the main sources of phenomenal interpretation, but also aids in the works project.

It starts with three shots: the first depicts the Baptist church built by Pastor John Chilembwe on the hill of Chiradzulu in Nyasaland [5]; the second abstracts it in a smoky mass that actually documents the act of bombing that blew it up in 1915; the third reveals its ruins and was reproduced in many copies, becoming a popular postcard to be sent throughout the British colonies.

Three black and white images, therefore, summarise the sad story of the Pastor who had sent a letter to the *Nyasaland Times* newspaper immediately after the outbreak of the First World War, in which he asked the government what expectations the Natives would have at the end of a conflict in which they were forced to participate.

Obviously, the letter was not published in the newspaper and Chilembwe organised a revolt that ended with his murder, the hanging of those actively involved and a series of arrests.

Everything that precedes and follows this horrific event remains in the



Fig. 4. William Kentridge, *shrinking map*. Second lesson, 2012. © William Kentridge.

photographic memory, locked away in a drawer in Kentridge's studio for twenty years, but never forgotten and a harbinger of a contemptuous critique of the cultural movement of the Enlightenment, even when the context exhibited shifts the focus from crude reality to the democratic space of the theatre. So, the scenic space is reinvented: it functions as a camera obscura in which the artist devises strategies for crossing blackness, with the aim to “show the need for the darkness, for shadow, to be present for anything to be visible” [Kentrige 2014, p. 45].

The preparatory drawings for the sets of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* [6], 2005, are to be understood as negatives of a photographic film to be mounted on the scenery of a scaled-down maquette of the theatre, on which to

test the projection effects of the animated sequences, following a direction designed to suggest the merciless object value that ‘Power’ has conferred on visual media in documenting the image of South Africa. Hence the need to treat the medium of drawing as a blackboard, on which to narrate a fiction superimposed on reality.

“The camera and the blackboard both resonate of the themes of power relations and colonial history. The camera was a pivotal instrument of imperial power; used to appropriate the ‘virgin lands’ and all they included, from landscape to humans and animals; on the other hand, the blackboard is the teacher's instrument and characterizes magician and mentor Sarastro” [Guarracino 2010, p. 273]. The sketchbook, on the other hand, is the medium on which to trace a



Fig. 5. William Kentridge, *cylindrical anamorphosis. Fourth lesson*, 2012. © William Kentridge.

social geography dating back to the days of one's youth, when the world was changing shape and distancing itself from South Africa, narrowing the map of modernity to widen that of exclusion (fig. 4).

Then the magnifying glass focuses on the city of Johannesburg, within which the topics of the third lesson orbit. The aim is to reconstruct a sort of memories cartography, metaphorically described in the form of documents collage, photographs and clippings to be brought back to the intimacy of one's own studio, where the long times of design thinking confront the voracity of the moments interrupted by the contradictions experienced.

There is a white sheet of paper, a charcoal pencil, an eraser, and the invention of *Drawings for Projection* –which made the artist famous in

the early nineties [7]–, to determine the animations made up of countless snapshots, taken with an old Bolex or Ariflex camera.

The blank sheet is always the same and Kentridge draws, observes, moves away and photographs, then erases, redraws, photographs again, repeating this practice almost maniacally [Krauss 2000, pp. 5-7]. What is really surprising is the hint of the trace that remains after each erasure, in the multiple layering of images in motion that echo a sense of uncertainty in piecing together the inconsistencies of a distant, or personally experienced, historical memory, where time slows down, and one needs to reflect. "Something glimpsed for a second may take a day, or days, to draw. Pleasure, frustration, self-doubt, states evocated by the materials and activity, take the

place of the initial impulse. There is still some connection to the first thought; but it is on hold. The impulse is sent to wait outside in an antechamber while the work is being done" [Kentridge 2014, p. 93].

The fourth lesson is entitled *Practical Epistemology: Life in the Studio*; William Kentridge says he filmed his eight-year-old son holding a paint can, opened it and spilled the paint on a studio wall, then threw the pencils on the floor and tore the sheets of paper into small pieces to scatter around. The film was edited backwards and shown to him. In his eyes? Magic.

It is clear that the stunt of a little pest is actually the result of a planned action. However, once the child has overcome his astonishment, he asks his father if he can do it again, but he is told that everything must be cleaned up first, including the stained wall.

The choice of medium in this case determines the rules of a game that in its, direct and inverse, reiteration alludes to the utopia of a perfect world. If to question oneself on the functioning of the instrument provided is to deeply understand its grammar, one can go back to the origins of precinema, to experiment not so much the limits as the possibilities offered by the phenakistoscope, the praxinoscope or the zootropium.

Continuing the journey backwards one encounters other devices, and it is easy to see how a complicit relationship is always created between action, rule, and knowledge of the medium in the convincing credibility of an illusion (fig. 5).

Regarding the fifth lesson, Kentridge begins by declaring his difficulty in preparing it. In *Praise of Mistranslation*, in fact, seems to want to dismantle the previously postulated assump-



Fig. 6. William Kentridge, linocut. Fifth lesson. © William Kentridge.

tions. There are notes on the table, but while waiting for thoughts and constructs of meaning to find their harmonious coexistence, inspiration comes from the preparation of a series of linocuts [8] printed on the torn pages of an old encyclopaedia (fig. 6). Shortly afterwards, the fragments of an obsolete bestiary left in the notebook's discard list, among the many phrases used in previous lessons, are intertwined with a recurring word whose meaning is not remembered: *asen*. The answer is in a book on the history of African art, which explains that this sort of small memorial altar for the dead is a small iron disc, about thirty centimetres wide, on top of which are placed metal silhouettes representing people, objects and animals that metaphorically recompose the circle and theatre of life. We learn that there are three actors involved in its realisation: the dead person, the donor who takes charge of describing it and the craftsman who must interpret it.

"Between the briefing by the donor and the making of the *asen*, there is a gap. A list of requests from the donor, and a configuration of solutions and responses to these from the craftsman. The *asen* becomes a rebus, a text made up of the words embedded in the images, a private riddle to be read. But then time passes, the donor joins the subject of the *asen* in death; he is not alive to remember his questions, to link the craftsman to the answers" [Kentridge 2014, p. 134], but the artefact remains.

The sixth lesson: *Anti-Entropy*, unlike the others, never refers to the reassuring completeness of the works of the past, but rather shares the questions of an artistic research in progress.

The Refusal of time and *Refuse the hour* [9], are respectively an installation and a performance structured in seven chapters, five of which take part of this latest Norton lecture. In the first case, the idea of a controlled order, which homogenises the mechanical time of the world, is confronted with the arbitrariness of the artificial boundaries with which African cultures have been fenced, so the arithmetic measure of duration cannot be compared with that of lived experience. Sequences of images are projected on the walls and coexist with the ticking metronomes in video projections that multiply, accelerating or decelerating the rhythms of an inevitable chaos [Huyssen 2017, pp. 88]. *Refuse the hour*, on the other hand, uses drawing and collage in a video montage in which the manipulation of the narrated events reflects precisely on the non-linearity of the time flow [Le Borgne 2013, p. 502] (fig. 7). Pneumatic time is what conditions us and programmes the succession of our actions, dressing us the instrument that regulates them in a continuous hand-to-hand combat. The geographical clock, on the other hand, measures distances. "The world was covered by a huge dented bird cage of time zones, of lines of agreement of control, all sent out by the clock rooms of Europe" [Kentridge 2014, p. 169], but resistance to colonial rule highlights the fragmentary nature of an entropy that returns only the splinters of a piloted order. We might as well concentrate on the suspended time, in which we collect the fragments, the lacerations, the scraps, in order to recompose them and draw from them a meaning. This is what the artist must make.

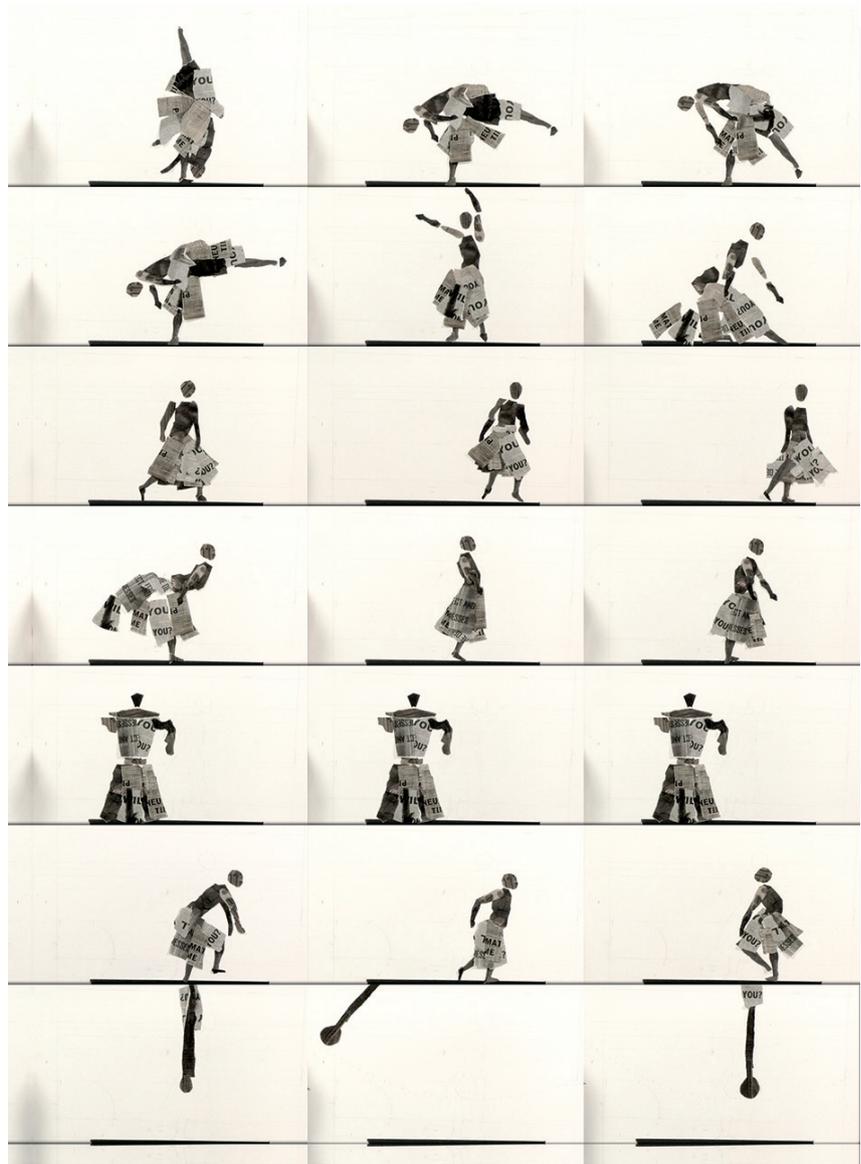


Fig. 7. William Kentridge, drawings, and collages for the video projections of *Refuse the hour*. Sixth lesson, 2012. © William Kentridge.

Notes

[1] Translation by the author.

[2] PAC: An acronym for Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, it identifies the pan-African political party founded in 1959.

[3] The *pass law*, imposed in 1952, was a kind of passport for black people. It was abolished in 1986.

[4] Translation by the author.

[5] Nyasaland was a British protectorate in Central Africa, established in 1907, and corresponds with the present-day state of Malawi, which gained its independence in 1964.

[6] William Kentridge produced many sketches, drawings, and engravings, evolving the work into two installations: *Preparing the Flute* in 2005 and *Black Box/Chambre Noire* in 2006. In both, maquettes of a theatre stage

integrate puppets and music controlled by a computer.

[7] See e.g., the short film *Monument*, 1990.

[8] Linocut is a printing technique involving the engraving of a linoleum matrix.

[9] *The Refusal of Time* was presented in its completed form at *Documenta 13*, Kassel, 2012.

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