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## Frieze

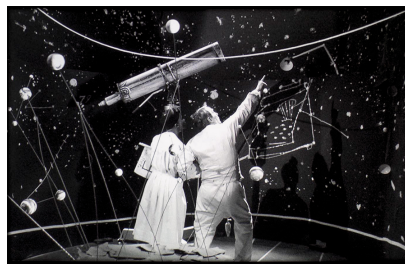
### *William Kentridge's Indictment of Colonial and Apartheid Injustice*

*As the artist's largest survey to date opens at Zeitz MoCAA and Norval Foundation, Cape Town,  
Sean O'Toole examines his dadaist lexicon*

By Sean O'Toole (September 26, 2019)



What does it mean to speak? To speak in a way that not only broaches the moral ambiguities of silence, but also probes the limits of speech's capacity to make sense of the world. William Kentridge, the Johannesburg artist and theatre director, addresses this question in a 2018 essay titled 'Let Us Try for Once'. The text forms part of a dispersed archive of writings (public lectures, essays, long-form interviews, feral notes) of equal import to his drawing, printmaking, sculpture, film and theatrical productions. Like many of his essays, this recent composition is digressive and fragmentary. Midway through, Kentridge pauses on two European cultural figures with dissimilar approaches to language: German dadaist Kurt Schwitters and Belarusian journalist and writer Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature.



William Kentridge with Philip Miller, Catherine Meyburgh and Peter Galison,  
*The Refusal of Time*, 2012, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery

Since 2017, when he premiered the work at New York's Performa 17 biennial, Kentridge has been performing Schwitters's 1932 sound poem 'Ursonate': a sonata composed of 'grunts, pauses, gestures and sounds'.<sup>1</sup> Kentridge describes its incomprehensible locution – 'Fümms bö

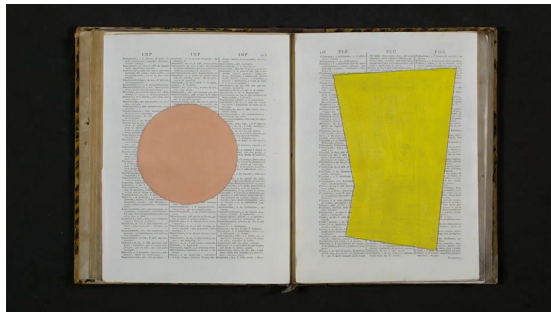
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wö tää zää Uu', for example – as evidence of 'the activity of speaking'.<sup>2</sup> He contrasts this calibrated play with Alexievich's oral reportage in *Zinky Boys* (1991), a sensory collage of testimonies based on interviews with participants in the Soviet-Afghan war, a decade-long conflict shrouded by official silence. 'The young boy took a long time to die and, as he lay there, he said the words for everything his eyes came across, just like a child who is just learning to speak,' Kentridge quotes. 'Sky. Mountain. Tree. Bird. Haversack.'

Alexievich's book was published just as white-minority rule in South Africa was coming to an end – violently in places but also, crucially, through dialogue and negotiation. (The country is still struggling to articulate a politics of social reconciliation capable of replacing the racist language of apartheid.) 'Here we have language at its most basic, in extremis, trying to tie the word to the world,' Kentridge observed of Alexievich.<sup>3</sup> Somewhere between her unnamed soldier grasping at the radiance of things and Schwitters's meaningless sounds, he adds: 'We operate with how our language ties us to the world and enables us to make meaning both of the world and ourselves.'<sup>4</sup> For Kentridge, this is the enigmatic power of speech: its capacity to name phenomena and to ethically situate a speaker within a broader context. But speaking, for Kentridge, is not simply about exposition and articulacy; his vocalism also involves exploring the limits of speech and its ability to truly reveal, defuse or bear witness to history, particularly in South Africa. These limits mark the failure of reason as much as they do the breakdown of language.



William Kentridge, projection from *Ursonate* performance, 2017, *Performa 17*, New York.  
Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery

Fragmentation is central to Kentridge's method. 'Let Us Try for Once' borrows its scrappy form from Theodor Adorno's classic *Minima Moralia* (1951), which Kentridge first encountered in the 1970s. The book provided a crucial insight: 'One can either take parts or already existing fragments or one can shatter what is there, what seems coherent, and rearrange them as Adorno does in that book, and see what they add up to,' he told art historian Tamar Garb in a 2016 interview. This method, which Kentridge applies to his art as much as to his writing, is greatly at odds with his upbringing.

Born into a patrician family of Johannesburg lawyers in 1955, at school Kentridge was a member of the debate club. Rather than instill a sense of faith in his family legacy – logical argument and rhetoric – the experience seems to have inspired the opposite. 'Argument and logic became something on top of the world, hovering over its surface, rather than embedded in it,' Kentridge explained during the first of his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University in 2012. 'I

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became an artist because I realized I needed a field in which the construction of fictional authorities and imagined quotes would be a cause for celebration, rather than rustication and disgrace.'



William Kentridge, projection from Ursonate performance, 2017, Performa 17, New York.  
Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery

While studying politics and African studies at Wits University in the mid-1970s, Kentridge joined a Brechtian theatre group and became involved in trade-union politics. His early drawings, posters and theatre works are characterized by a youthful faith in didacticism and indictment; the productive possibilities in the breakdown of language only surface later. In 1986, Kentridge received a Young Artist Award from South Africa's National Arts Festival, a prominent honour that included a request for a public lecture. The resulting essay, 'Art in a State of Grace, Art in a State of Hope, Art in a State of Siege', heralded the beginning of a prolific, if fragmented, writing practice.<sup>5</sup>

Kentridge's ruminative writings provide insight into his cosmopolitan upbringing, Jewish heritage, early rendezvous with drawing, felicitous immersion in the cultural Marxism of 1970s Johannesburg, rejection of irony and urbanity and, not insignificantly, his status as a 'deserter' of his class, to paraphrase Adorno. This corpus of prose, which looks out at the world as much as inwards at the artist's own production, doesn't make Kentridge's life entirely transparent, but it does thicken an appreciation of his high-modernist tendencies, his love for Russian constructivism and German expressionism, and his art's literary scaffold. That this writing has not received critical attention may owe partly to how Kentridge describes it: as words attaching themselves to his images like captions to photos, or as instruments to detect sonorities in his work.



William Kentridge, 'Six Drawing Lessons', Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 2012, Harvard University, Cambridge, video stills.  
Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery

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'It is always reflective,' Kentridge told me during a recent visit to one of his studios. (He keeps two in the town of his birth.) 'It is kind of justifying the work after the event.' When we met, he was in the process of orchestrating the layout of 'Why Should I Hesitate: Sculpture', the first museum exhibition devoted exclusively to his sculptural production. Curated by artist Karel Nel for Cape Town's Norval Foundation, the show coincides with 'Why Should I Hesitate: Putting Drawings to Work', a presentation of Kentridge's drawings, prints and films across town at Zeitz MOCAA. Together, the two shows form the largest survey of his work to date.

The artist tells me that he maintains a clear division of labour 'between the me that writes in my notebook and the self that walks around the studio thinking: how can we continue?' It is the latter action of 'circling' in the studio, 'gathering energy' and 'hovering at the edge of an idea' that matters most to him, as he notes in his 2013 essay 'Thinking on One's Feet'. In his Norton lectures, Kentridge asserts his identity as an artist who believes in 'the primacy and the necessity for stupidity', particularly in the studio, adding that he is an imperfect critic, especially of his own work. But Kentridge's writings are compelling precisely because they range beyond his own practice to offer acute indictments of colonial and apartheid injustice.



William Kentridge, 'Six Drawing Lessons', Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 2012, Harvard University, Cambridge, video stills.  
Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery

'Art in a State of Grace' was written during a period of intense civil strife and cultural isolation. Its elliptical style and cosmopolitan manners link Kentridge to South African Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer – a close family friend whose husband, the art dealer Reinhold Cassirer, pushed the artist to return to drawing in the mid-1980s after a period of abandonment that included studying mime in Paris and working in commercial film. With its 'bathed and perfumed and depilated white ladies', Gordimer's 1966 novella, *The Late Bourgeois World*, describes the social class and racial privilege that Kentridge relentlessly examined in his early drawings and animated films, such as *Felix in Exile* (1994), which chronicles the lives of capitalist Soho Eckstein and artist Felix Teitelbaum. Gauche in their critique and awkward in their embrace of colour, Kentridge's neo-expressionist fables portray a societal structure that, as Gordimer writes in her searing 1983 essay 'Living in the Interregnum', is 'built to the specifications of white power and privilege'.

Kentridge's 'Art in a State of Grace' vocalizes these themes, jumping with Gordimer-like ease and lyricism from refinement to revolution. He describes Vladimir Tatlin's unrealized Monument to the Third International (1919–20) as 'one of the great images of hope' under Bolshevik Communism, albeit one whose ideals were dashed by 'their betrayals' under Stalinism. Betrayed

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idealism is a recurring theme throughout Kentridge's work, most recently in *The Head & the Load* (2018), a musically ranging, visually layered and textually rich ensemble theatre piece that investigates colonial-era African aspiration against the backdrop of World War I. Some two million Africans served in the war, of whom 250,000 died of disease or were killed in action: a debt that is still under-acknowledged.<sup>6</sup>



William Kentridge, *Art in a State of Grace*, 1988, silkscreen on paper, 164 × 98 cm.  
Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery

Though Kentridge directly reckons with this violent history, his process-based work does not permit despair. Writing in '*Art in a State of Grace*' of Max Beckmann's painting *Death* (1938), Kentridge states that the work 'accepts the existence of a compromised society and yet does not rule out all meaning or value, nor pretend these compromises should be ignored. It marks the spot where optimism is kept in check and nihilism is kept at bay.' Kentridge sees himself working in this 'narrow gap': the same breach that separates Alexievich's wartime nihilism from Schwitters's joyful incoherence.

As I sat in the studio with Kentridge, we re-read '*Art in a State of Grace*' together, and he marked key passages in red pencil. He was visibly struck, not just by the succinctness and lingering truisms of the lines, but also the articulate certainties of his younger self, which to him felt both proximate and strange. 'I thought I had to give a talk that was different from an ordinary lecture,' Kentridge explained of the genesis of this essay. He used a slide projector to collage image and text: his ambition was to merge the competing elements; to create, in effect, articulate and experiential drawings.



William Kentridge, *I am not me, the horse is not mine*, 2008, performance documentation.  
Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery

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This kind of sparring with and against the lecture's form, its conventions and expectations, directly informed Kentridge's Norton series. It also undergirds works like *The Head & the Load* as well as *I am not me, the horse is not mine* (2008), a lecture-performance in which he discussed research for his then-upcoming 2010 adaptation of Dmitri Shostakovich's 1930 opera, *The Nose*, at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. All three works are built on a foundation of language and argument, which Kentridge disassembles and visualizes.

Early Soviet culture, with its contest between egalitarian optimism and totalitarianism, has long intrigued Kentridge. *I am not me, the horse is not mine* derives its title from a phrase Russian peasants used to deny guilt, which Kentridge unearthed from the testimony of Soviet writer Nikolai Bukharin, who was put on show trial in 1938. 'Bukharin exemplifies so many of the victims of Stalinism, and stands as a practical example of language and logic taking their belongings and going on their own journey – showing that violence and the grotesquely comic are close bedfellows,' said Kentridge in a 2011 interview with the Turkish newspaper *Today's Zaman*, indicating how Joseph Stalin's purges robbed language of its reason.



Dmitri Shostakovich, *The Nose*, directed and designed by William Kentridge, 2010, performance documentation.  
Courtesy: The Metropolitan Opera; photograph: Ken Howard

Tragicomic absurdity runs through *The Head & the Load*, one of the artist's most ambitious works, which premiered at London's Tate Modern. 'It was a real test to see how incoherent something can be and still make meaning using language as a vehicle of incoherence,' Kentridge told me of its collaged music, dance, spoken word, film projections, mechanized sculptures and shadow play. The performance commences with a recitation of various manifestos – in English, French, Italian, Swati and Zulu – and draws on sound recordings of World War I African prisoners made at the Half Moon Camp near Berlin, Tswana proverbs collected by author and political leader Sol Plaatje, as well as details from a suppressed 1914 letter by Baptist minister and anti-colonialist John Chilembwe, who questioned why Africans should 'shed [their] innocent blood' in Europe's war.

This vast polyphony is not always comprehensible, its indictments of the exploitation of black lives in the service of empire subsumed by the effects and exigencies of theatre. 'There are the words themselves, and their syntax and grammar and their relation to the outside world,' Kentridge stated in his Norton lectures. 'But there is also the discipline of the medium, that which is in between the words – the devices which one uses to either pin the words more closely to the world outside or to encourage the listener to make the connection, to convince.'

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Rather than set out to narrow the gap between grammar, argument and its elocution, Kentridge allows for incoherence in his theatre work, leaving room for the audience (and himself) to doubt the authority of what is said.



William Kentridge, *The Head & the Load*, 2018, performance documentation.  
Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery

‘I prefer to work from not knowing what I am doing – from doubt, from indecision, from failure,’ Kentridge told me when I interviewed him back in 2005. The artist’s multi-media theatre work, *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997), a collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Company, underscores the centrality of doubt and the failure of language in his work. The performance abstractly grappled with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: a legal body convened to reckon with the country’s violent past. In a lecture given in Antwerp in 1997 – the year *Ubu and the Truth Commission* premiered – Kentridge expressed his ‘mistrust in the worth of Good Ideas’, asserting instead ‘the contingent, the inauthentic, the whim, the practical, as strategies for finding meaning’. So, while Kentridge may try to tie the word to the world as he speaks, he fully accepts that meaning is conditional and prone to slipping away.

*‘Why Should I Hesitate: Putting Drawings to Work’ continues at Zeitz MOCAA and ‘Why Should I Hesitate: Sculpture’ continues at Norval Foundation, both Cape Town, South Africa, through 23 March 2020.*

Main image: William Kentridge, *The Head & the Load*, 2018, performance documentation. Courtesy: the artist and Goodman Gallery

1 William Kentridge, ‘Let Us Try for Once’, lecture at Brooklyn Public Library on 9 December 2018, reprinted on Literary Hub <<https://bit.ly/2MFCaKI>>

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Kentridge delivered the speech at the Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts Winter School in July 1986. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev first reprinted the talk in her book *William Kentridge* (1998).

6 Estimates regarding African casualties during World War I vary widely, but probably around 250,000 African soldiers and porters died during the war, in addition to around 750,000 civilians.