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William Kentridge and the forgotten victims of Africa's Great War

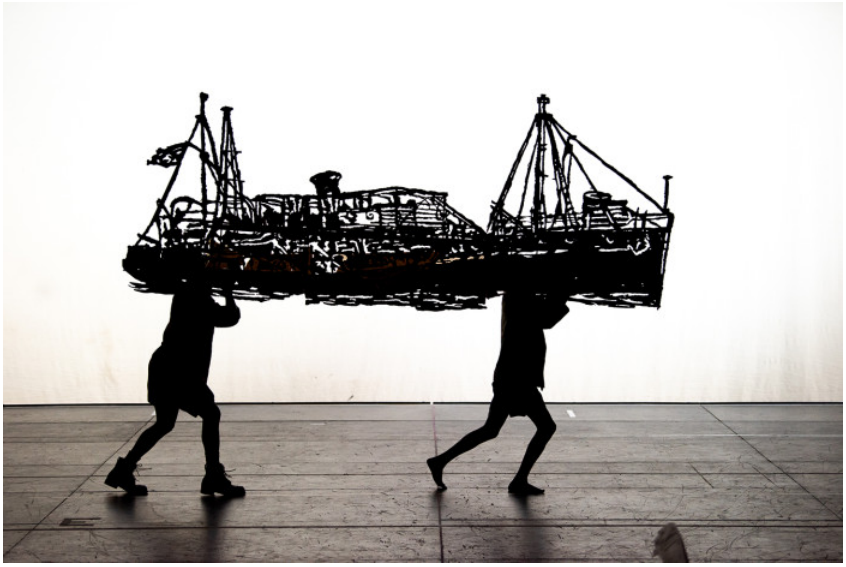
By Peter Aspden (July 6, 2018)

Does art have the power to affect people's view of war and politics? In the years during and following the first world war, art did its best to reflect the desolation and sense of waste prompted by the monstrous number of lives lost between 1914 and 1918. Art and literature portrayed a world that had fallen apart and lost its moorings to meaning: atonal music, abstract painting, stream-of-consciousness writing. Surrealism turned the world into a strange procession of dreamlike images. Dada turned it into a bad joke.

When the war ended, and there was time to reflect on the scale of its horrors, artists were divided in their response to what Virginia Woolf later described as a "chasm in [the] smooth road" of western civilisation. Some turned to escapism: listen to the soothing, elegiac meditations of Ralph Vaughan Williams's Pastoral Symphony of 1922, influenced by the composer's wartime experiences as an ambulance driver in France and Greece.

For others, this was too feeble a reaction; 1922 was also the year of James Joyce's Ulysses, and TS Eliot's The Waste Land, radical overhauls of the literary imagination. Eliot's exhausted lines — "I had not thought death had undone so many" — belied the spikiness and energy that Modernism brought to western culture. It was matched in the field of the visual arts. The postwar period spawned Futurism and Vorticism, the "only possible" techniques, as the British painter Christopher Nevinson wrote, "to express the crudeness, violence and brutality of the emotions seen and felt on the present battlefields of Europe".

He was wrong: his German counterparts Otto Dix and Max Beckmann dug deeper, producing hideous, scarring images — “Corpse in Barbed Wire”, “The Night” — that tried manfully to tell it like it really was.



'The Head & the Load' © Stella Olivier/William Kentridge

Others turned to Africa. Western culture, for them, had gone too far in its sophistication and its love of ornamentation. It needed to reset itself, to reconnect with the purity and simplicity that could be found in the non-naturalistic and tribal art of the African continent. The story is well known: Pablo Picasso turns the wrong way in a Paris museum and encounters a display of African masks. He goes home and refashions a painting he is working on, “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon”. It changes the course of art history.

What none of those artists, musicians and writers ever bothered to address, in their scrambling for sense and meaning during those devastated years, and in their modish refashioning of their vocations, was what had happened to Africa itself.

The cathedral-like space of Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall is frenetic with building work. The stage is being set for the world premiere of a new work by William Kentridge, South Africa’s leading contemporary artist: The Head & The Load, a theatrical tour de force about the role of Africa, and its people, in the first world war.

Kentridge is better known for the studied draughtsmanship and visceral impact of his charcoal drawings and animated films, which have chronicled the tumultuous history of his homeland since he started working in the 1970s. Now in his sixties, he is broadening his scope. The Head & The Load is an epic work, combining dance, shadow theatre, mechanised sculptures and film projections. It aims to right a historical wrong, to make people aware of a story that is as wretched as any he has told.

The spread of Europe's Great War into Africa cost hundreds of thousands of lives, many of them belonging to the local carriers, or porters, who were conscripted by force to join the battle. Men, women and children were made to haul the heavy equipment of the warring colonial powers across huge distances. More than 100,000 of them died through illness, exhaustion and malnutrition.

'The Head & the Load' at Tate Modern © Stella Olivier/William Kentridge

The war was fired by colonial interests. Britain wanted to destroy the naval and communication infrastructure in German East Africa that could allow German boats to attack Allied ships in the Indian Ocean; Germany wanted to forestall an attack on its African colony by attacking its neighbours itself. The attraction of acquiring new territory proved compelling to both sides. More than two million Africans were mobilised to those ends, and close to a million African soldiers, labourers and civilians died in the conflict.

The title of Kentridge's new work is taken from a Ghanaian proverb: "The head and the load are the troubles of the neck." It works on two levels, he tells me on a visit to the gallery earlier this week: "It is the physical load that was carried all across Africa, but it is also the historical load of colonialism, which was magnified and exemplified by the war.

"The war became a crucible for heating up all the paradoxes of colonialism. Europe was not just a weight on the shoulders of Africa, it also entered deep into people's psychic understanding." Many Africans in the incipient middle classes were keen to join the war, he says. "They believed and hoped that once they would be seen taking part, alongside white soldiers, they would be seen as equals and given rights afterwards. "But that was always a false hope. There was never any chance of that. They hoped they would be given the right to run their own countries, but what they were given instead was a bicycle and

a greatcoat. The irony is, even those were treated as precious objects. Instead of throwing them back and saying, 'Damn you, we want our own country,' they hung on to them."

William Kentridge © Laura Pannack

It was a triple humiliation for the African people: they were compelled to fight a war that was nothing to do with them; they suffered in huge numbers; and they were deceived into thinking that their help would be rewarded with some movement, at least, towards self-governance. The felonies are further compounded, says Kentridge, by the western world's lack of knowledge of the subject.

"My anger at my own ignorance was a spur to the project. Like so many people, my sense of the first world war came from Wilfred Owen and All Quiet on the Western Front. Now, Wilfred Owen's poems are remarkable. But they swallowed all the air around everything else." He decries the "constructive amnesia" that smothered the subject of Africa's war, and quotes the disparaging remark of a military figure of the time: "Lest their actions merit recognition, their deeds must not be recorded." The Head & The Load, he says, is conceived as a beginning of recording and recognition.

Kentridge, with the help of composers Philip Miller and Thuthuka Sibisi, aims to recreate the sense of dislocation that was felt in the postwar years in The Head & The Load. Its libretto is a mash-up of forms and languages: a Zulu translation of the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, extracts from the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, which divided up Africa, turned into a collage of nonsense. His own art here is a kind of homage to the confused art of 100 years ago. “In a world where good logic has failed,” he explains, “you have to find an illogic. To use the absurd, not as a joke, but as a way of showing that logic has gone awry.”

Kentridge was born in Johannesburg in 1955 to lawyer parents who were prominent in the anti-apartheid movement (his father represented the family of activist Steve Biko, who died in police custody in 1977, prompting international outrage). He says his childhood was coloured by the “rage and agitation” around the dinner table, and a growing anxiety over what his own role should be in the political struggle.

“I knew the country was going to change. But I thought, how can you be a lawyer when all the laws are going to have to change as well? Well, the country did change, but you still had to have lawyers. That was stupidity on my part.”

Finding the formidable footsteps of his parents too imposing to follow them into law, he instead took a postgraduate art degree, designed political posters, became involved in local theatre groups, left South Africa to take a theatre course in Paris, and returned home to immerse himself in film-making. He says he had clarified, by this time, only what he was not going to be. “I was an artist while waiting to see what would happen when the world changed. But by the time it did change, I was still an artist and it was clear I wasn’t going to be anything else.”

He turned away from the agitprop art of his earlier years, unhappy to be preaching to people. “I was designing posters for trade unions, telling people this is what they needed to understand. But that made the assumption that I knew more than the people looking at the posters, and that I was instructing them in some great truths.”

When he returned from Paris, he says he had less faith in knowing what he wanted to say to people, but trusted the process of art-making, hoping that some kind of meaning would emerge by the end of it. He began to specialise in printmaking and etching, inspired by the western masters of the genre — Rembrandt, Daumier, Hogarth — but also the work of fellow South African Dumile Feni, whose highly charged black-and-white charcoal drawings proved to him that you didn't have to work in oil-on-canvas to call yourself an artist.

Kentridge's jerky animated films, created by making erasures and additions to drawings as they are filmed over a relatively long exposure, addressed the problems of South Africa in a series of unforgettable, allusive images. He created archetypes from the country's life, such as the brutish businessman Soho Eckstein and his liberal counterpart Felix Teitelbaum, using their adventures to mirror the debates that surrounded the country's future.

In one of these animations, there is a fantastical scene in which Eckstein uses a coffee plunger at the breakfast table, which keeps on travelling under the table, and becomes a shaft drilling down into one of the mines that he owns, passing the tortured faces of the cramped miners on its way. It is a perfect example of Kentridge finding meaning in the image while in the process of drawing it.

"I realised, as I was drawing the coffee pot, that [the plunger] didn't have to stop." The hellish descent into the mine is also a journey into illogic, making its point far more powerfully than a more obviously political work. When rational discourse, and sentimentality, and aesthetic loveliness fail to make their points — that is when the artist comes into play, Kentridge believes. That is ultimately how he or she can shape the world.

In sharp contrast with many of his fellow contemporary artists, Kentridge is not shy to enter into intellectual or philosophical dialogue — a legacy of those domestic dinner-table conversations — and has a sharp ear for soundbites. I ask him about a memorable description he gave in his Norton lecture series at Harvard University in 2012, in which he talked of the artist's pen as a "loaded weapon, full of every thought that has never been expressed".

It is a beautiful image, I say, but did it not give him a sense of dread, that constant responsibility to rummage for the unsaid? "The Germans have a word for it," he replies instantly. "Torschlusspanik. The panic of closing doors. The fear of opening one door rather than another, and hearing it slam behind you, once you have made your decision; but maybe that decision is the wrong one, so you would rather stand paralysed in front of three doors to avoid making it. Torschlusspanik."

A scene from William Kentridge's 'The Head & the Load' at Tate Modern, London © Stella Olivier/William Kentridge

It sounded a bit like Brexit, I say jokingly, but he is not entering through that particular conversational door. We may not be quite at the build-up to the first world war, I insist, but many of us in the western world felt that logic, to use his own phrase, is beginning to go awry. Did he have any wise words to help us?

"I don't. I wish I did." He pauses for a moment. "What I see is the destructiveness of the forced politics of identity. Working here, in the theatre, with all these different people working together, there is this kind of small-scale utopia of bastardy. People from different traditions, with different experiences, misunderstanding, but making wonderful things through that misunderstanding. Mandela and Gandhi learnt from people outside of their traditions."

Through the grotesquerie and ultimate tragedy of The Head & the Load, Kentridge wants, in a centenary year of remembrance, to remember something that is barely known in the first place: the story of those hundreds of thousands of forgotten victims of a war that they did not even understand.

He tells me another fragment of the story: that of the Chilembwe uprising of 1915, a rebellion against British colonial rule in Nyasaland (modern Malawi), in the course of which the organising Baptist minister John Chilembwe wrote a letter to the authorities spelling out his objections to Africa's participation in the war.

The letter captured the imagination of the young Kentridge. "I remember writing an undergraduate essay about [the subject], because it struck me as containing, in those three months of rebellion, the whole history of African resistance over the last 100 years.

“I never thought of addressing it in theatrical form. But that letter has sat in a drawer of my studio for 40 years. It is not a new thought.”

‘The Head & the Load’ by William Kentridge takes place in Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall from July 11-15 as part of 14-18 NOW. The performance will be available to view in full at tate.org.uk between July 21 and August 20