

Of Trees and Flipbooks: Multi-media Wounded Passages in William Kentridge's *Second-hand Reading*

C. Maria Laudando

Understand that hope is also a political category.
Understand that making sense of the world, and
of yourself, is a daily activity.

(William Kentridge 2016)

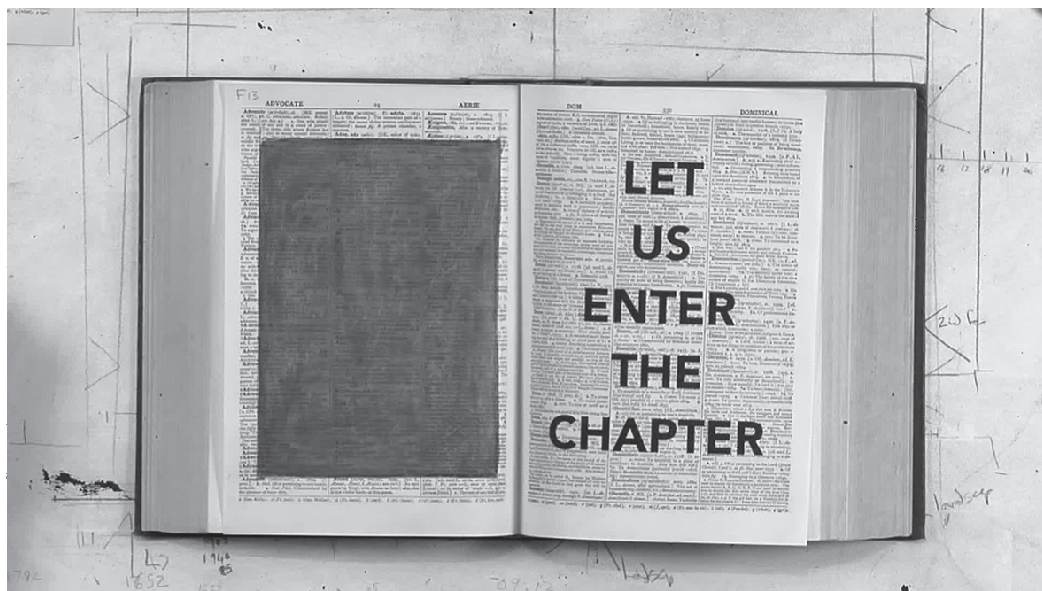
Abstract

The article discusses the affective, political and medial issues revolving around the memory/oblivion nexus as powerfully inflected by the renowned South-African artist in his work and, in particular, in his recent constellation of works titled *Second-hand Reading* (2013). This multi-media miscellany of preliminary drawings, flipbooks, lectures, sculptures and video installations not only confirms Kentridge's lifelong involvement with the 'interregnum' of post-apartheid South Africa and of our transitional age at large but also marks a sort of mesmerising autobiographical excavation of the multiple ways in which images and words turn and return, can be opposed and juxtaposed, hidden and unveiled, torn and repaired, calling attention to an ongoing metamorphic process of improvisation and experimentation between visual and verbal, drawing and writing, narrative and antinarrative. In a way the poignant flipbooks in the *Second-hand Reading* video installation magically turn the yellowish pages of obsolescent encyclopedic texts into a (back) stage of uncanny transformations and migrations of the words-as-images themselves with their disruptive typography as well as their overdetermined 'load' of fugitive memories and creative mistranslations, simultaneously working as deep intimations of estrangement and engagement.

Key-words: William Kentridge, memory and obsolescence, flipbooks, multi-media narrative.

FIGURE 1

William Kentridge, *Second Hand Reading*, 2013 Single Chanel HD. Film Duration 7'. Edition of 9 ©William Kentridge. Courtesy Galleria Lia Rumma Milano/Napoli.



In a world of growing economic and geopolitical instability, which has simultaneously undergone a process of overwhelming technological abstraction and interrelatedness while facing the unrelenting – and all too bodily – pressure of masses of expatriates and refugees, it is no longer possible to ignore the daily and often explosive friction between the local and the global inducing everywhere a diffuse sense of permanent emergency. On the one hand, the unpredictable effects of global economy and governance have exerted a considerable strain on any democratic and national articulation provoking a sense of disenchantment, if not disconnection, with the public sphere of political representation; on the other, the volatility inherent in the aggressive rhetoric of innovation and “forward thinking” of digitality has further contributed to uncovering deep emotional vulnerabilities bringing to the forefront the problem of memory and displacement, a fractious issue crucial in the critical conjuncture of the present which has come to involve the very ‘obsolescence of the human’ (Brown 2015)¹.

¹ On globalisation and local disjunctures, the classical study is Appadurai (1996). For further references see the “Introduction” in this issue by Laudando and Minier. For

Obviously enough, this uncertain scenario of contradictions and anxieties is having heartfelt repercussions especially in the field of humanities at large. If in the last decades of the twentieth century the pre-eminence of the performative as critical ‘travelling’ concept and ubiquitous practice has already disrupted the disciplinary solidity of logocentric paradigms favouring a cross-fertilisation of heterogeneous interests and agendas all famously marked with the “tenebrous” and “controversial shiftiness” of the prefix “post” (Bhabha 1994: 1), the digital revolution of the new millennium seems even more equivocally pressing for a forgetful insidious celebration of turns and crossovers in the proliferation of the “trans-” (McLeod 2011: 1)². Without indulging either in nostalgic retrospective or apocalyptic prevision, the task at hand probably concerns precisely the difficulty of understanding the ghostly elision of the ‘present’ itself in the continuous mediatic invocation of ever faster and smarter high-tech interfaces with the world and ourselves. At stake is the all too human, posthuman or antihuman inflection of memory and desire in an age of permanent transitions, above all those slippery and surreptitious transitions from displacement to replacement that the process of obsolescence puts in motion (see Ulricchio 2015). The chaotic and ever-shifting environment of contemporary mediascapes as well as what we may term the strategic convergence of the ‘performative-*cum*-digital’ seem to necessitate an unprecedented effort to grasp at a radically different epistemological framework precariously engaging both virtuality and embodiment, spectrality and materiality, presence and absence, interaction and alienation, thus bringing to the forefront issues of political and affective urgency such as distraction and oblivion in an age of widespread psychological distress and traumatic dislocation³.

an insightful survey of obsolescence see the essays in Tischleder and Wasserman (2015), in which this key question of modernity is discussed in historical, aesthetic, and affective terms.

² On the concept of transnation, the process of transculturation and the rethinking of post-colonial studies see, among many others, the classical study by Ashcroft (2010).

³ The bibliography on those issues is extensive as well. For a stimulating survey of performance studies and digital culture see, among many others, the volume edited by Beyes, Leeker, Schipper (2017).

In this respect, the ‘return’ of narrative everywhere in contemporary culture represents a telling case. Despite the repeated death notices (of the author, the text, the self, and ‘humanities’ as a whole) which have notoriously characterised our postmodern and belated condition (Lyotard [1979] 1984), the advent of “electracy” and cultural remix in the new millennium (Ulmer 2002) has simultaneously encouraged the resurgence of secondary orality and storytelling performances in a wide range of transmedia and participative formats more and more frequently spread over multimedia platforms, calling for higher levels of interactivity and, thus, eliciting both bursts of re-creative enthusiasm and prospects of more sombre dilution and dispersion. Indeed, nowadays the narrative and/or storytelling ‘boom’ is discernible everywhere⁴: in the daily lives of individuals and communities, in marketing and management, in politics and journalism, in tourism and leisure, in pedagogy and didactics, not to mention the ever-growing popularity of hybridised inter-medial forms such as bio-fiction, multi-screen narrative, documentary theatre and so on. And once again, given the transitional state in which everything fluctuates with no clear-cut direction in view, the ongoing proliferation and dissemination of stories across different media, arts, fields and disciplines lends itself to ambivalent ‘denouements’: on the one hand, the reassuring recognition of an inborn and ineradicable human drive to be enacted, valorised and capitalised more than ever and, on the other, the incipient dystopian token of an ultimate algorithmic and dehumanised de-narration.

It is against this slippery and controversial background that both the work and thought by William Kentridge has gained prominence in the last decades receiving worldwide acclaim especially as a significant contribution to a rethinking of the arduous but all the more essential task of ‘humanities’ in the present global conjuncture of novelty and obsolescence. Indisputably one of the most versatile and productive artists of the contemporary international scene, the

⁴ Again, on this the bibliography is ever-growing. See, among many others, Langellier and Peterson (2004). For a couple of seminal references on narrative transdisciplinarity and transmediality see the “Introduction” by Laudando and Minier and the critical framework discussed in the articles by Cimitile and Esposito in the present issue.

South-African master has always resisted all ingrained expectations which usually subtend the fashionable lexicon of postmodern art and multi-media digitality. Rather than indulging flawless technical precision or sharing the conceptual and anti-figurative array of mainstream art system (at the time of his formation), he invokes in the provocative simplicity of his few reiterated gestures both outmodedness and open-endedness, improvisation and sustained meditation, firmly grounding all his extraordinary investigations of the unpredictable metamorphosis of images across media in a half subliminal half self-conscious dialogue with the literary, the textual, the “physical amplitude” and the many unexpected afterlives of books, thus capitalising on the performative and affective resonances of words and phrases as well⁵. As Emma Crichton-Miller (2015) nicely recapitulates, he is “an artist of black and white, a printmaker first, who uses drawing, animation, film, theatre, sculpture, opera, and even tapestry, to make compelling works that interrogate some of the darkest corners of history and the human psyche”.

Since his first experiments with drawing and animation in the late eighties Kentridge has not only prioritised manual skills and a physical and exploratory involvement with obsolete tools (a piece of charcoal, a sheet of paper and a 16mm Bolex movie camera), old-fashioned objects (like the famous Bakelite phone) and distinctive derelict landscapes (the ‘waste land’ of abandoned mines on his Johannesburg outskirts), but also detailed all the lengthy phases, or better, ‘passages’ of his peculiar ‘palimpsestic’ procedure: marking, smudging, erasing, pacing, filming, what he has often ironically termed as “stone-age film-making”, rooted in the hours of labouring spent in his studio “stalking the image”⁶. It is worthwhile

⁵ I refer here to the expression used by Kentridge in his keynote lecture titled *Second Hand Reading* at Rochester University (19 Sep. 2013), online at <https://vimeo.com/78123839>, last accessed May 25, 2018. I will return to this insightful lecture in the last part of my article.

⁶ Unsurprisingly, the uniqueness of Kentridge’s procedure has triggered considerable critical attention. In this limited space, here a brief mention is due to the seminal work by Krauss (2000, 2017) on the artist’s postmedial inventiveness in response to the obtruding pressure of apartheid, thus revealing a fruitful tension between formal and sociological concerns. See also a couple of major retrospectives (Christof-Bakarghiev 2004; Rosenthal (2009), and the recent work by Maltz-Leca (2013, 2018) on all the metaphoric and philosophical implications of the artist’s

remembering that his first approach to art in the seventies was in the field of etching (between 1976 and 1978, he attended and later gave engraving classes at the Art Foundation in Johannesburg) and concomitant with his active participation in the oppositional work of the Junction Avenue Theatre Company inspired by the Brechtian *Lehrstück*. The emphasis on printmaking as a pictorial tradition intensely imbricated with words and textuality is twofold: as an intellectual and social weapon of great impact in African visual culture (with a significant development in South Africa) for its seminal contribution to the emergence of a critical self-reflexive “metropolitan perspective” (Enzewor 1997)⁷; and as a sort of intriguing “art of reversals” and juxtapositions, urging “the printer constantly to picture images⁸ reappearing as negations or transformations” (Stewart 2005: 64). Both aspects may well have spurred the artist to figure out his own unique procedure of erasure and reconstruction at the core of his films devoted to Johannesburg’s divisive characters and mutable outlines⁹. Kentridge has in part acknowledged this himself in one of his distinctively metaphoric ruminations: “There is also a way of thinking of an etching as an extraordinarily, ridiculously

studio process in the context of South Africa’s larger political transitions. As is well known, Kentridge’s impressive interdisciplinary and multi-media body of work is strictly related to the ‘palimpsestic’ dimension of his many-sided formation, since his procrastinated beginnings as artist recapitulate the heterogeneity and plurality of his previous professional attempts (a degree in politics and history, theatre workshop, art lessons, mime classes at the prestigious École Lecoq in Paris, direction of film and production of TV series).

⁷ Printmaking has always offered a powerful means for social and political propaganda or critique due to its great potential for replication and wide dissemination. Kentridge has acknowledged both the influence exerted by local artists such as the impressive drawings by Dumile Feni and the rich European tradition with its own distinctive satiric and political focus (above all Hogarth and Goya). It is worth remembering that one of Kentridge’s first works is a reworking of the Hogarthian cycle *Industry and Idleness* within the contentious apartheid regime of the late eighties.

⁸ To this I might add the correlated words.

⁹ Needless to say that in the case of Kentridge, a crucial source of information and critical insights is to be found in his own generous lecture performances, in his book arts, and in his many conversations with scholars of different fields, which have all proved material to my article. Here one key reference will suffice: *William Kentridge: Anything Is Possible* (art 21 2010), www.art21.org/anythingispossible/video/full-feature-william-kentridge-anything-is-possible/.

complicated form of animation, different states of the plate, when you know that you will rework them” (in Crichton-Miller 2015). Thus, if drawing undeniably represents “the essence”, that is “the technical and metaphorical backbone” of all his multi-faceted works (De Vivo 2015: 172)¹⁰, printmaking may be considered the fieldwork most strictly related to drawing (and to writing as we will see) and as such equally fundamental not only for Kentridge’s interest in perspectival subtlety but also for his “hyperarticulated accounts” (Twidle 2016) of the creative potential of ‘second looks’, ambiguities and uncertainties.

Retrospectively, this insistent focus on process, hybridity and provisionality has also been explained in intimately autobiographical terms: as a matter of ‘temperament’ – the artist’s inveterate “sense of uncertainty” in himself (Kentridge and Morris 2014: 29) –, and as his early and bewildered absorption in the peculiar transient landscape of his city, shifting shape with the different implacable stages of the gold extraction. In this latter respect, Johannesburg itself turns out “like an animation of a city”, “a city that erases itself”, with a geological rather than geographical base: “its only reason for existence is what is hidden, what you can’t see, and that is the gold under the ground. And the traces of it in the mine dumps and the abandoned mine headgears” (p. 36). Thus, from the very start of his career, transitions and memory – with its tricky and tortuous detours, its painful erasures and sudden epiphanies – figure prominently in Kentridge’s oeuvre both at the formal and thematic level and prompts the artist to tentatively and obliquely trace every time again a sort of ironical contradictory self-portrait, what he has lately called an “autobiographical narrative in the third person” (Kentridge 2018). As a matter of fact, the strange and forceful allure of uniqueness and obsolescence which hauntingly oozes from his wide spectrum of interdisciplinary works is deeply embedded in his

¹⁰ The passage is worth quoting at some length: “The sheet of blank paper is the setting for this artistic vision: it is an exhausting and ontologically incomplete process which is carried out with just a few tools (a graphite pencil, a piece of charcoal) and simple, repeated actions (drawing, filming and erasure). Although he has a multi-faceted background and has always been reluctant to be tied to rigid disciplinary labels, drawing arguably offers a unifying theme in his work: it represents the foundations and the ultimate destination” (De Vivo 2015: 172).

personal history of migration and displacement, descending from a family of Jewish Lithuanians who moved first to Britain and then to South Africa, and growing up in Johannesburg during the turbulent decades preceding the end of apartheid as the son of prominent anti-regime lawyers. Thus, paradoxically enough, “Kentrledge’s deliberately anachronistic techniques” spanning the crucial years of his country’s political transition “proved utterly timely in engaging questions of social trauma and historical memory: in evoking a moment when so much of the past was made to vanish in plain sight but still hovered in the mind’s eye” (Twidle 2016).

Attending to the very ‘present’ of his creative process in terms of a radical provisionality, plurality and uncertainty of meaning has never meant for Kentridge to isolate himself in his studio indulging the fertile chaos of germinative ideas *per se*, but rather to absorb the historical and ‘geological’ instability of his milieu, foregrounding the very consequences of each possible turn of development or blockage – in his own pithy formulation “to explore provisionality with consequences” (Kentridge and Morris 2014: 24) – in formal, epistemological and political terms. He has often elaborated on this foundational issue:

One can think of the studio as a place where the world is invited in – in the form of images, drawings, phone conversations, news reports – and the world is then taken apart and fragmented and re-arranged, and then sent back out into the world as a drawing, film or text. In between, there are many hours of walking round the studio stalking the image – a process which is [a] mixture of stupidity, uncertainty and decisiveness. It is not just a question of peripheral vision, of seeing images out of the corner of your eye to put them together, but peripheral thinking is also required. There is a need understanding the importance of things at the edges, of that which does not fit. Waiting for a clarity to reveal itself. Hoping for connections to consolidate (Kentridge 2016: 12).

Indeed, the studio as a performative space has come centre-stage in a wide range of his recent work, invoked and represented by Kentridge as an elected utopian place daily experienced both “as event and epistemology” (in Bhabha’s sharp definition)¹¹, in all ways crucial

¹¹ See Bhabha’s speech of introduction as President of the Mahindra Humanities Center and member of the selection committee to the first of William Kentridge’s

for developing the creative as well as cognitive and ethical potential of drawing; and, given the artist's dominant propensity to reflect on "process as metaphor" (Maltz-Leca 2018), the studio has continued to spur further intriguing analogies – even if always inflected with his distinctive cautionary and doubtful gesture – intensely engaging with the process of writing and reading, the "pages of a mind" (in Boucher 2013) and the pages of a book, as is the case in his astonishing constellation of different bodies of work exhibited together with the eloquent title of *Second-hand Reading* (2013). As is usual with Kentridge, the multi-media projects gathered under this self-ironic label gradually evolved from his previous work, further developing thoughts and concerns already at stake in his *Drawing Lessons* for the Norton Lectures at Harvard (of which he was the 2011-2012 recipient) and in his ambitious video and audio installation *The Refusal of Time* for Kassel *Documenta* (13) in 2012. The very germination of the "second-hand" series thus confirms the interdisciplinary and (mis)translational interrelatedness which characterises his work at large, as if he were constantly tracking down the traces of his anterior activity, incessantly 'returning' to the 'excess' of collateral ideas just glimpsed and at some points abandoned, but still dormant there in the 'universal archive' compressed in his studio and ready to be resumed, or, to use his famous pair, to be 'disinterred' out of oblivion and 'reconfigured' into new forms¹².

The press release for the exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York (Sep. 17-Oct. 26, 2013) detailed the labyrinthine

Drawing Lessons for his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, 20 March 2012, <http://mahindrahumanities.fas.harvard.edu/content/william-kentridge-drawing-lesson-one-praise-shadows>, last accessed May 25, 2018. The artist was appointed to this prestigious lectureship for his outstanding achievement in innovation across disciplines and his tremendous gift for communication. The Lectures are published as *Six Drawing Lessons* (Kentridge 2014).

¹² *Universal Archive* is obviously a key term in the exhibition and, as we will see, is the title used for a large linocut series (intriguingly, one of the lithographs is parenthetically subtitled as *Nine Typewriters*). The verbs "disinter" and "reconfigure" instead belong to a series of Kentridgean pairs (such as "TEAR AND REPAIR", "HIDE AND SHOW", "SHOWING AND VANISHING", or the telling oxymoron of "CONSTRUCTED INVISIBILITY") written large in sans serif on several torn-out pages used both for the drawings and the prints. Needless to say, these terms recall the formal, visual but also discursive and narratological procedures of human knowledge at stake in his works.

overlapping and intersection of the four different kinds of work on display: ink drawings of South-African spindly trees on old reference book pages (like the 1826 edition of George Crabb's *Universal Technological Dictionary* or the 1936 edition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*); three flip-book films and their related "blocks of drawings on found pages"¹³; two sets of bronze sculptures titled *Rebus* and a series of "kinetic" sculptures, in great part recycled from the *Refusal of Time* and "constructed from found objects such as bicycle wheels, sewing machines, bellows, megaphones, tripods and drums"; and, lastly, three new series of prints (*Rubrics*, a set of 14 red silkscreens with phrases taken from his notes for the Norton Lectures, and the series of *Universal Archive* and the two *Colour Chart* prints both "made as ink drawings on paper and then transferred to lino and cut"). Just a cursory glance at this list makes one immediately aware that the process under scrutiny here equally concerns both images and words, concepts and materials, as well as the shifting relations between figure and ground, sense and nonsense, memory and amnesia, displacement and replacement. The title itself, as already hinted, is provocatively telling and triggers at least two orders of associations: one revolving around psychic and socio-political anxieties of outmodedness and obsolescence, marginality and belatedness – Kentridge's belonging to a peripheral, provincial place, "on the southern tip of Africa" (Maltz-Leca 2018: 1-28), in comparison with the more attractive

¹³ This body of work included the triptych *NO, IT IS*, shown on three flat screens, based on old editions of *Workshop Receipts*, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and *Practical Enquiries*; the homonymous flip-book film *Second-hand Reading*, and *Sonnets*, a flip-book drawn on Shakespeare's *Sonnet* n. 18. Worth noticing here is the alternation of technical, reference books with literary texts dealing with despondency, aging and immortality, which deepens the elegiac resonances of the videos. The press release from which I quote was issued by Marian Goodman Gallery on August 31, 2013, see https://www.mariangoodman.com/sites/default/files/exhibition/press_release_pdf/Kentridge.2013.pdf, last accessed on May 25, 2018. The exhibition was also shown in Lia Rumma Gallery in Naples in spring 2014 and on that occasion Kentridge held a memorable lecture titled *A Walking Tour of the Studio* at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" (5 May 2014), thus confirming the centrality of the studio in the new collection. I am grateful to Dr. Maria De Vivo and Lia Rumma Gallery for providing me with a video of the event in which the artist also projected and commented his *Second-hand Reading* flip-book film.

and fashionable centre of Europa –, the other regards the semantic sphere related with the indirect approximation and the hearsay which characterises much of our daily assumptions and received notions, thus suggesting issues of cognition and acculturation. Once again, questions of hierarchy and dichotomy (the divide between people and things who come first and those who come second, subtending any system of political discrimination, such as apartheid) are inextricably enmeshed with questions of passive habitude or imaginative re-use, and thus issues of acquiescence and alienation or agency and revision.

It is significant, in this respect, that the artist's own statement for the exhibition focuses on "the question of mistranslation, and the pressure that imperfect understanding gives to the act of imagination". Hence the passages of "ink drawings to linocuts to bronzes; ink drawings to trees" and "the objects of the Rebus having alternative readings – seen this way, the bird becomes its own cage; the tree contains the man carrying the wooden load" (Marian Goodman Gallery 2013). Not only is the multi-media and multi-layered prominence of this constellation of works explained in terms of "formal mistranslations" and "intersections", but the imaginative exploration of misleading and equivocal traces somehow also mischievously responds to an act of deliberate 'requisition', as if the provocative obsolescence of old books and outdated objects were urging for new uses, as follows: "The requisitioning of old forms for new uses: encyclopedias are supports for drawings, sewing machines and a bicycle become sculpture. Words as provocations towards meaning rather than clear syllogisms: the phrases in the drawings push us to make some sense; the Rebus sculptures as hieroglyphs, placed in a line like a line of letters or words or syllables which can be rearranged to make new sentences" (Marian Goodman Gallery 2013).

With this, we reach the very core of the conceptual framework subtending the contrapuntal assemblage and passages from "old forms" to "new uses" in the collection, that is the question of obsolescence in relation with those "narrative, or theoretical demands"¹⁴, already implicated, as suggested above, in the

¹⁴ The phrase is used by Kentridge (2018) in an interview on his interdisciplinary work for the late installation of *In Terms of Performance* online anthology, as follows:

dismissive and yet wistful echoes of the title: ‘second-hand’ is crucially involved with perceptions of cultural displacement and replacement, remediation and demediation (see on this Stewart 2011), or, to use the artist’s own key terms, “overdetermination” and “secondary revision” (Kentridge 2018). If, as Peters argues (2015: 92), ideas of obsolescence or decay lend themselves well to a “metonymic slide into secondary meaning”, this bending may be “actually a condition of creative appropriation or understanding”. In the case of *Second-hand Reading* the obsolescence, “foregrounded” or “strange-made”, concerns to a preponderant extent the uses and relations of books and trees, engaging matters of materiality (the physical passages from trees to books and *vice versa*) and performativity (the ‘constructed invisibility’ of obsolete things and marginalised subjects) both as experienced in the tentative trial and error procedure of his studio work and as translated or mistranslated into “metaphor and other doubtful enterprises” to recall Maltz-Leca’s 2018 insightful study. In this respect, the exhibition at stake here constitutes a major recapitulation of Kentridge’s complex body of attitudes, gestures and concerns with language itself, his grasp of its multi-layered and multi-faceted inflections, his sensitivity to the chaotic instability of daily speech performances, his penchant for punning and paradoxes, his impatience with the coercive fixity of law and other instantiations of logocentric order and discrimination.

Whatever the form or medium, it always comes somehow as a surprise to realise the extent to which Kentridge’s “art begins in words” (Twidle 2016), how often the sheet of paper on the wall calling for the artist’s first mark is the page of an old book or a collage of several pages torn out and reassembled in strange “overdetermined” grids ready for his and our “second-hand reading”. Significantly, his obsession with books as a background for drawing and animation has something to do with his early familiarity with the layered surface of etching¹⁵, and with his propensity not to “structure the

“The medium that I’m working in makes narrative or theoretical demands that push the drawing in a direction it would not go in if I were only thinking about drawings and the history of drawings”, <http://intermsperformance.site/interviews/william-kentridge>, last access May 25, 2018.

¹⁵ As Kentridge explains: “With a printed book, you’re not starting with a white

world through ideas in color” as painters do, but rather to “think the world in charcoal, almost as if the charcoal were some kind of writing” (in Dolfi Agostini 2014). Though much less used than Indian ink in the actual production of the drawings made for the multi-media series, charcoal is still insistently invoked in the lapidary phrases that punctuate both the fixed pages in the drawings and the pages turning in the flip-book film, working as a sort of elegiac trace of the strange associations between drawing and writing and between the veld’s vanishing landscape and the crux of memory. As Kentridge elucidates: “You know in South Africa we have these very dry winters and around Johannesburg and there are always these felt fires so the whole landscape turns into a charcoal drawing, literally [...]. There’s something in the idea of that landscape meeting the drawing half way, it’s the sheet of paper and the burnt field coming together. But the thing about charcoal, obviously, is that you can draw with it as quickly as you can think, you can change your mind as quickly as you do, [...]. You just wipe it with a cloth, it will have the trace of your previous thought, but that already starts to have a trace of the history of the process, to show that the next thought that you come up with is not a clear one by itself, it is tainted by the previous one (in D’Mello 2013).

The intimacy with the South-African landscape and its traumatic history saturates in a way the whole heterogeneous body of the works, especially through the imposing sequence on the walls of a dozen solitary elongated trees, indigenous to the Johannesburg area of the artist’s childhood (Fig. 2). On the one hand, their evocative force literally draws on the torn-out pages of old dictionaries or technical manuals on which they are superimposed as if to claim their natural precedence over those tools of rationalistic knowledge

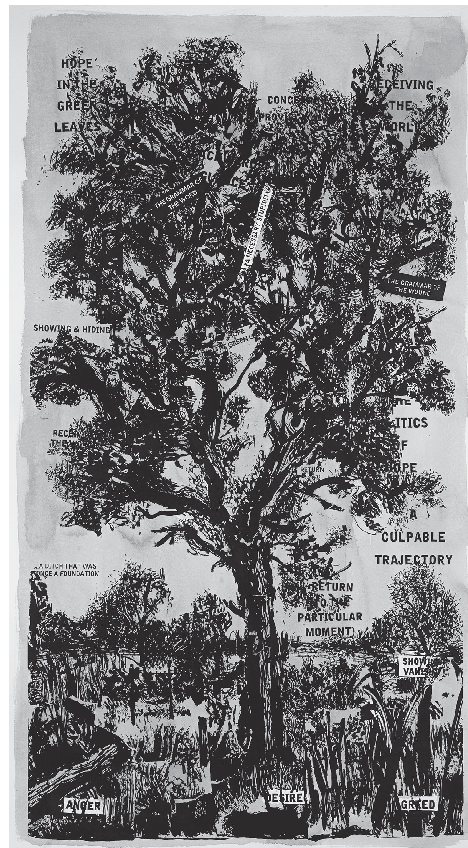
sheet of paper but with a tone on the paper. It’s a bit like etching – it’s very nice to start with a plate that’s not perfectly mirror-polished and clean but that has some idiosyncratic elements and givens against which you can start to work” (Kentridge and Morris 2014: 158). The final section of this prolonged and insightful conversation on the philosophical underpinnings of the artist’s work is devoted to books and is introduced by a page on the verso inscribed with a sort of gigantic title in the manner of a Vorticist heading (“WE / REACH FOR A / BOOK”), and four aligned subtitles (“The literal surface” / “The given of the text” / “The sympathetic paper” / “The ShOre of the page”) besides a minuscule slogan further below which reads “NOT LETTING THE BOOK GO” (p. 156).

underlying the violent settlement of Europeans in Africa. On the other, their luxuriant, thick foliage bears a number of inscriptions, more or less visible, usually in the peremptory tone of the imperative or the performative tense of the continuous present, which work as cryptical narrative pointers, deliberate elliptic traces pressing for possible meanings and connections, calling for our own mistranslations of forms and memories from trees to books: “HOPE IN THE CHARCOAL”, “RETURN”, “RETURN TO THAT PARTICULAR MOMENT”, “PERFORMING THE MEANING’S ABSENCE”, “THINKING ON ONE’S FEET”, “MEETING THE PAGE HALFWAY”, “THE OVER-DETERMINED BRANCH”, “CONCERNING NARRATIVE”, “FINDING THE ATTITUDE”, “PAPER GESTURES”, “SIGHS AND TRACES”, “PRODUCTIVE MISTRANSLATION”, “WHAT IS OF US AND WHAT IS NOT”, and so on. It is the same scrambled words and phrases, always emphatically written large in sans serif typeface as if shouting out for attention, that repeatedly pass through in the flip-book film in alternation with the artist’s animated drawing of himself, caught now in a number of pensive moods, now in the very act of walking or jumping over a chair. The elegiac rhythm of page turning, heightened by the moving song by South-African composer Neo Muyanga in Sotho on a local police massacre, creates a vivid mesmerising effect of “optical illusions and aural contraptions” (Pechman 2013), eerily unfolding metamorphic passages from objects to people and to landscapes, partially reduplicated in the two sets of the *Rebus* bronze sculptures. As another reviewer aptly details:

Scenes of the South African bush, [...], unfurl across both pages. Two dancers, sometimes female, sometimes male, their breasts marked with black crosses, wave white flags marked with a telegraphic dot and dash. A few gestural blots of ink double Mr. Kentridge walking, and typewriters, crows, Moka coffee pots, megaphones, globes, Malevich crosses and all of Mr. Kentridge’s other totemic double stand-ins for the prototypical human being flicker past rapidly. A leafy tree, verso, and a man carrying an oil drum, recto, each rotate to become a man with drum, left, and tree, right, and then continue rotating to resume their original forms. (These and other perpendicular doubles are repeated in bronze, a series of nine forming a sculpture called *Rebus*.) Two conical megaphones become two bowls of fruit. The dancers fade into dancing trees (Heinrich 2013).

FIGURE 2

William Kentridge, *Hope in the Green Leaves*, 2013. Linocut on Hahnemuhle Natural White 300gsm 185x102 cm. Edition of 40. ©William Kentridge, photocredit Mario Di Paolo. Courtesy Galleria Lia Rumma Milano/Napoli.



A great deal of the associative and imaginative ‘leaps’ that the film with the correlated drawings and sculptures activates do concern the very ‘rebus’, connectors and underpinnings of ‘narrative’ itself, as a number of those catchphrases unmistakably attest. In this respect, it is telling that the keynote lecture given by Kentridge at Rochester University on 17 September 2013 for the presentation of his exhibition cleverly interwove three acts of storytelling from different stages of his life which inspired the sibylline titles of three of his arboreal drawings in the collection. The first, entitled *Remembering the Treason Trial* (Fig. 3), has to do with his entrancing mistranslation as a little child “of his father’s daily departure for the Treason Trial in late 1950s Johannesburg” as a kind of adventure into a mysterious place of their garden “somewhere between ‘trees

and tile” (Maltz-Leca 2014). The second, *The Shrapnel in the Wood*, goes back to his work on *The Black Box*, when he came incidentally to know that the Swedish wood was preferable to the German because the latter was still full of shrapnel from the Second World War; hence the idea of trees as uncanny witnesses of history, and a consideration both of the trees as symbols of longevity and as sort of natural archives of historical traces. The third, *Making the Tree-Search*, offers another case of fruitful misunderstanding, when he misheard on the phone that a friend was making “a T-shirt” and instantaneously imagined a “tree search” on the computer screen in order to make sense of the incomprehensible compound. In the end, “what emerged from Kentridge’s seemingly stray reflections and adventitious anecdotes was a rigorous set of questions plying the possibilities and limits of thinking and knowing, and the role that not only books, but also words, play in shaping it” (Maltz-Leca 2014). In a way, it may be not too haphazard to say that the lecture subtly ‘narrativises’ the passages that the exhibition instead ‘performs’ by dissecting and reassembling with the disruptive force of its theatrical, emphatic typography: subjective memories of childhood hesitations and anxieties spinning a reassuring imaginative geography mix with traces and erasures of historical traumas and with the all too human need to make sense of defective perception or imperfect understanding. “A SAFE PLACE FOR STUPIDITY”. The pages of the book as the pages of the mind; the books in one’s library as a kind of enlarged self-portrait; analogously, the studio perhaps as a performing book, an enlarged version of what passes in one’s own head, everybody prisoner of one’s own limited notions and limited words.

A special emphasis goes to the reiteration of the temporal linker “whilst” which strangely points at the invisible fractures and the interstitial gaps of traumatic dislocation: “WHILST REACHING DOWN”, “WHILST LISTENING TO THE MESSAGE”, “WHILST WAITING AT THE GATE”, “WHILST LISTENING TO THE SAFETY INSTRUCTIONS”, “WHILST CLEARING THE BROKEN GLASS”, “WHILST FINDING MY WAY (IN THE CHAPTER)”, and so on. As Kentridge has explained, whilst “is the strange grammatical form used in the official records of mine accidents – specifically in the gold mines [...]. Functionaries of the mines – clerks, shift bosses – were trained to report on all accidents using this form. There would be the description of an ongoing activity,

and then the rupture of the accident” (in Bhabha 2016: 231). Equally worth quoting is Bhabha’s commentary on Kentridge’s words:

An ongoing activity carried out with the expectation of timely progress and customary closure is suddenly ruptured beyond recognition. Whilst announces the normal order of the day – its idealized linear progress, [...] – and then confronts the quotidian with a sudden reversal of fate that forever disrupts its duration and durability. The ongoing narrative ends whilst the story of suffering begins; life as we know it is tragically broken. Whilst introduces a scalar disjunction between the temporal unfolding of the everyday and the instant caesura of emergency. [...] The everyday is now in a state of crisis; the diurnal is driven by death; the ongoing is gone. Continuity comes face-to-face with the seizure of time in iterative, pulsating patterns. Everyday/emergency, life/death, ongoing/arrest, continuity/cutout [...] (pp. 231-232).

FIGURE 3

William Kentridge, *Remembering the Treason Trial*, 2013. Lithograph: 63 Panels hand printed on a Takach litho press from aluminium plates in 3 runs on 145 gsm Zerkall. 100% cotton, on a 230 thread count base sheet with archival carboxymethylcellulose adhesive 195x178 cm. Edition of 25. ©William Kentridge, photocredit Mario Di Paolo. Courtesy Galleria Lia Rumma Milano/Napoli.



Bhabha is here referring to a later multi-screen installation by Kentridge, *More Sweetly Play the Dance* (2015). In the *Second-hand Reading* flip-book film everyday actions are interrupted by a dancer's slow agonies of death till her or his dead body is confounded with the ground and swirling brushes of dust obfuscate everything. The final transition from this figure to ground is just preceded by a crescendo of threatening verbal associations and slips of the tongue: "A GRAMMAR OF THE WORD" translates to "A GRAMMAR OF THE WORLD" and further to "A GRAMMAR OF THE WOUND", an uncanny trio followed in turn by "WHILST" and "WHILST HOPING AGAINST HOPE". But the death of the dancer is not the end of the story though. A female dancer reappears and then turns into a slender tree, a bird disintegrates into a handful of shards, the artist's double resumes walking, joined again by a black man running, and then the pace of page turning suddenly accelerates with a vortex of objects and figures metamorphosing into one another until a tree again returns to a female body. "TEAR AND REPAIR". "END WITH LOVE". "UNHAPPEN".

"Unhappen" is the most ambiguous end for this uncanny narrative "made entirely of titles" (Heinrich 2013) on the gaps and wounds of narrative itself. On the one hand, it is the definitive, the mystifying end of culinary plots, the constructed invisibility of history in official records which in more than one way 'unhappen' the deaths of their victims letting the corpses silently merge into the apparent oblivion of the ground. But, at the same time, 'unhappen' is the end that does not end, the antilinear and counternarrative move, the equivocal turn or return which is actually the beginning of any act of utopian deconstruction or reversal¹⁶. In every story and storytelling there is always an excess of meaning, an ambiguity of intentions, a vacillation over direction. And there is no way out of the process, no way out of responsibility: "WHICHEVER PAGE YOU OPEN, THERE YOU ARE".

In terms of a provisional conclusion "concerning narrative" just a scramble of 'second' chances: "Return", "Return to That Particular Moment", "Unsay", "Unhappen".

We all come to know the poignancy of those intimations. The heartbreaking desire to make time run backwards and return, return

¹⁶ It is worth remembering here Kentridge's deep engagement with the formal and revolutionary ideas of Modernist avant-gardes, as visually prominent here in the sans serif typeface and size of the catchphrases.

to that particular moment, and unhappen the dooming plot that was to follow from the wrong word, the missed chance, the hurried or procrastinated decision. Nobody ever can. But with a little hope in a piece of charcoal and a handful of “less good ideas”¹⁷ we may perhaps start to unhappen at least our blinding grids and delusory certainties.

Unhappen: “NOT LETTING THE BOOK GO”.

FIGURE 4

William Kentridge, *Second Hand Reading*, 2013 Single Chanel HD. Film Duration 7'. Edition of 9 ©William Kentridge. Courtesy Galleria Lia Rumma Milano/Napoli.



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¹⁷ This is the ironical name chosen by Kentridge for the Centre of Interdisciplinary Incubator Space that he has recently founded in a suburb of Johannesburg.

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