



The Necessary Accidental

By Ashraf Jamal | Peer Review

Abstract

This essay on William Kentridge's ideas and practice, in particular regarding his multi-media theatrical works, was prompted by a visit to Zeitz MOCAA to see his retrospective in 2019. Watching a documentary on the making of the 'The Head and The Load', I was struck by the production's frenzied energy, and the exhaustive attempt to break down any predictive or conclusive vision. This has always been Kentridge's approach – his animated works are exercises in a deconstructive erasure. I have addressed this matter elsewhere, in my essay 'Faith in a Practical Epistemology: On Collective Creativity in Theatre'

(*Predicaments of Culture in South Africa*, 2005), but on this occasion, while watching the documentary, it was Nietzsche's view in *Contra Wagner* which proved the trigger, namely, that 'Wagner's art is sick. The problems he brings to the stage – purely hysterical's problems – the convulsiveness of his affects, his over-charged sensibility ... the instability he disguises as a principle'. While Kentridge does not share Wagner's reactionary ideology, I argue that there is a connection between the two whose root lies in a decadent sensibility. And the peculiarly late-modern Western crisis that underlies it.

Introduction

'Wagner est une névrose,' Nietzsche declared (Turner, 2014: 258). We know what people in glass houses shouldn't do, but Nietzsche never cared for censorship. When he damned Wagner in his broadside, *Contra Wagner* (1889), it came at a great cost to himself. It was his third book on the composer, and his last. There, for the first time, he concludes that 'Wagner's art is sick. The problems he brings to the stage—purely hysterics' problems—the convulsiveness of his affects, his over-charged sensibility, his taste that craves stronger and stronger spices, the instability he disguises as a principle ... presents a clinical picture which leaves no room for doubt' (Turner, 2014: 258). I am no clinician, but I think we can agree that Wagner is a neurosis, a gateway drug for nationalist extremism and fascism, phenomena that are omnipresent today. It is intriguing that against extremism, Nietzsche should champion Bizet, a composer he found more soothing, more human—more 'African' (Nietzsche, 2016: 182). That Nietzsche was also ill when he wrote *Contra Wagner* does not diminish the force of his insight. That his own thinking would be distorted by his sister to mirror the man he eventually loathed is a curse he could not avoid. 'I am just as much a child of my age as Wagner—I am a *decadent*', said Nietzsche, 'The only difference is that I recognised the fact, that I struggled against it'. His judgement of Wagner is also a judgement of himself. Most of all, it is a judgement against their age.

Kentridge is no Wagner. He doesn't share the composer's diseased fascination for myth or his extremist views. And yet, working my way through the Kentridge retrospective (which spans over forty years) at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (MOCAA), it is Nietzsche's third critique of Wagner that resurfaces. It is the immensity of the scale, the density and intensity of the experience, that leaves me dumbfounded and aghast. Blockbuster shows do this to me. They dissipate far more than they articulate, preoccupied as they are with ensuring that the viewer exits the scene with their bruised head ringing—hobbled, hocked, reverent. After two hours standing in front of a small screen watching a documentary on the making of *The Head & the Load* (2018)—its theme the tragic fate of African soldiers, largely deployed as load-bearers in the First World War—it is Nietzsche's concern for the 'convulsiveness' of affect; the 'over-

charged sensibility'; the 'taste that craves stronger and stronger spices'; the 'instability' that disguises itself as 'principle,' that comes flooding back.

I withdraw from the screen, exhausted, overwhelmed, and like Nietzsche, longing for the therapeutic calm Bizet affords. 'Bizet's music seems to me perfect,' wrote Nietzsche. 'It comes forward lightly, gracefully, stylishly. It is lovable, it does not sweat' (Nietzsche, 2016: 182). Kentridge's music (and here I'm speaking of its mechanics), his shadow puppetry, his voice-song-sound, his light projection, and his living bodies (as further prostheses), are diametrically other. Kentridge confronts us with the destabilisation of the senses, the routing of causality and the embrace of what the German poet Novalis (a.k.a. Friedrich von Hardenberg) termed 'the necessary-accidental'. Discomposure is the thing; art the nightmare from which we cannot awaken.

Derived from a Ghanaian proverb—'The head and the load are the troubles of the neck' (Kentridge, 2014: 28)—the drama, first staged at the Tate Modern in 2018, introduces us to the stressors that inform the work's theme and making. I realise that, after Nassim Nicholas Taleb, this production is 'anti-fragile', a thing 'that gains from disorder'. As writes Taleb, 'Everything that does not like volatility does not like stressors, harm, chaos, events, disorder, 'unforeseen' consequences, uncertainty, and critically, time' (2013: 12). The Head & the Load, however, is defined precisely by these invasive conditions. They are not conceived as anomalies. They are core elements in the making and experience thereof. The necessary-accidental is the artist's engine-room. If the Ghanaian proverb is fitting it is because, for Kentridge, the problem—be it

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the making of a work or the history that informs it—is in the head, the load it carries, and the neck that struggles to support it. Physical and psychological, this burden finds its echo in Nietzsche's reading of the culture Wagner embodies as decadent and neurotic. The key difference, however, is that Kentridge never enshrines the problem or reduces it to a fetish.

As the art dealer Jeff Poe remarked, 'our business is to sell symptoms articulated as objects' (Thornton, 2008: 187). A symptom is a physical or mental manifestation of illness. It is a telling term when applied to art—what it does, how it works. If Kentridge's art is symptomatic, it is because it reveals illness. It tells us what we are, or what we are fast becoming. The reveal, however, is never stated. It is implicit. Implicated. One enters trouble, engages in discord. It is the symptom articulated as art, as experience, that we absorb. If art has become a global opiate, this is certainly why. It is an intoxicant, a distraction for a world distracted by distraction. Whether good or ill, art as an answer to life is a charged debate. In the case of Kentridge, what interests me is why and how the artist arrived at that point of near hysteria—his own, but more importantly, the global hysteria that his art symptomatically expresses. When Nietzsche declared that Wagner is a neurosis, it was not the man he was solely assessing, but what he culturally represents. If Kentridge represents a neurosis, it should be understood similarly. The root of the problem, which Kentridge strives to convert into a strength, lies in the society that fostered his genius. Here I am not only talking about South Africa, but the fretwork of Empire and European influence upon which it is crucially founded. One cannot think of Kentridge's work outside of Europe and Empire. The 'decadence' which Nietzsche failed to survive is also Kentridge's inheritance. It is a decadence that remains with us, that defines us. We are all '*une névrose*'. The art we make, live alongside, and inhabit is symptomatic of a cruel, unloving, and frenetic age that will not allow for the glitch that is Bizet—a place for calm, for love.

If Wagner is Kentridge's thither world—the dark side which stalks us all—it is not Bizet but Henri Bergson who is his corrective. 'To exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly,' Bergson writes (Malarkey & Pearson, 2014: 7). Change (as a condition for making) is central to Kentridge's practice. It allows us to endure the load

we fail to carry. For Kentridge, this failing is not an error. It is inevitable. Making is always an unmaking. Nothing holds because nothing is fixed. Time not only evolves; it reverts, flips, folds, comes asunder. We exist in snarled and ravaged bits and pieces. Unlike Wagner, Kentridge is unmoved by predestination. There is no assigned point at which a being or work arrives. If the volatility built into a work can be said to err on the side of hysteria, it is not solely such. Between anxiety and hysteria lies an infinity of symptoms. But what cannot be doubted is Kentridge's attentiveness to some or other complaint. Sickness is the crux; art its manifestation (and, if you are an optimist, its antidote).

Whether Kentridge's art can save us depends on one's understanding of what is happening, and whether resolution has a part to play in a given work's structuring of feeling or affect. My view is that Kentridge refuses closure. Beginnings and endings are interruptions. Movement is peripatetic. Nevertheless, there is a method that is intuitive. One knows this, not because of Kentridge's distinctive signature—what his work looks like—but because of what it does, how it moves. If his art appears to bind it is because of the vitality with which it is infused, its energy (which, as I've noted, is nerve-wracked and raw). If a work appears to complete itself it does so under duress, as though thrust beneath a guillotine. The cut is visible; the fragment torn, sutured, cut again. Or dissolved, pooled, dissolved again. That some have insisted on resolution in the face of dissolution is perplexing. After Bergson, I can only agree by conceiving Kentridge's works as 'open wholes' or subjunctive propositions.

In his reading of Bergson, Gilles Deleuze notes that 'movement only occurs if the whole is neither given nor giveable. As soon as a whole is given to one in the eternal order of forms or poses ... there is no longer room for real movement' (2004: 7). This qualification is vital. As I understand it, one must intuit incompleteness as a critical part of the creative act. The 'forms or pose' a work assumes cannot succumb to the idea of itself. It must understand its aggregative existence within an unfinished schema. To suppose, as many do, that Kentridge's 'forms or poses' are iconic is to mistake their meaning and thrust the artist into a realm he refuses—that of mythic or symbolic art. An object (be it a megaphone, tripod, pruning shears, or

coffeepot) is never reducible to itself. Neither is it a symbol for some greater metaphysic. Their purpose in a given situation is always-already provisional. Their movements are never over-determined. Rather, it is change—duration, movement, volatility—that matters. It is not what something is or what it represents, but what it does. If Kentridge's art is never closed (always open), this is because his intuitive method sees a solution as a ligature in a schema that remains intrinsically incomplete.

No South African artist surpasses Kentridge's achievement. This is the message that tolls as I work my way through two encyclopaedic retrospectives, staged between 2019 and 2020 at the Norval Foundation and Zeitz MOCAA. If the Norval showing had the languid elegance of a Bizet score, it was hysteria that distinguished its display at Zeitz MOCAA. This agitation—most evident in Kentridge's films and dramas—was further amplified by the building that housed them. It is not that I seek to distinguish the event from its placement (they mirror and feed off each other). My point, however, is that Zeitz MOCAA is a sick building. It was once a grain silo, a locus for imperial trade. It was re-conceived by Thomas Heatherwick. The grain it once housed would prove the kernel for its redesign. In the end, however, the change was more cosmetic than substantive. It was more of a conceit, an idea about itself, than a genuine attempt at making the structure functional for the display of art. Instead, it collapses under its hubris. Once you have passed the awe and glamour that informs its towering atrium, through heavy-twinned, white hospital doors that divide an incoherent warren of rooms, lacking in oxygen, it is as though one has entered an unwholesome sanatorium. The building does not care for art. It cares for itself and its vainglorious statement: 'Look at Me!' The sixth-floor restaurant with its bug-eyed windows overlooking the harbour and Atlantic Ocean is the only other valve that allows one to breathe.

If art must palpate the mind, move it between sickness and health, then Zeitz MOCAA is infected by the former while the Norval Foundation, with its acres of glass, its cathedral-like heart and lilting sequence of anterooms, achieves the latter. One can breathe and contemplate. If Wagner and Bizet are the two

chambers in Nietzsche's mind, they find their mirror in the bipolarity of these exhibition spaces, and the differing stories they tell about the artist's work and the age and culture it reflects. This is not to say that Kentridge is solely subject to his time. On the contrary, his influences span millennia. But it is the splicing of past and present, and, more significantly, Kentridge's response to decadence—a culture spanning the late-nineteenth century to the present—that is his surest focus.

The American ethnographer, James Clifford, wrote that the world became permanently surreal after the First World War (1988: 119). This is because it realised essences to be inessential, absolutes a mockery, betrayal a condition for living. At the root of the fall lies trauma. Modernism, Kentridge's greatest resource, is the outcome of this trauma. Nietzsche of course predicted it, as he predicted the persistence of conflict, the rise of fascism, and the toxicity of consensus and political correctness. It is within this trauma, and the neurosis it generates, that Kentridge positions his art. His global celebrity, like the Herculean joint retrospective, is a pyrrhic victory. The spoils of success are never the main concern but the 'main complaint'—symptoms of a project forever protracted and unfinished. What matters is never the thing itself (let alone the accolades thrust upon it), but its processual articulation, and the inarticulacy built into that process—a work's ever-changing changeling quality; how things accrete, moulder, blur, waver, morph, sicken.

In the snare of making, the outcome cannot be predicted. The reason for its existence, trauma, is key. It asks that we suspend judgement. It is not what we want from a thing that matters, but what it wants, the anthropomorphic force that drives it. For Bergson, it is this force which accounts for the molten power that is change. This is why, for Kentridge, canonisation is akin to death. As for the system that rigs a work's monetary value? Therein lies madness. What matters far more, and what distinguishes Kentridge's oeuvre, is its irresolute avidity. The artist does not make things. He makes questions. Whether static or mobile, his art is performative. It does not re-enact the reason for its existence, but existence itself, a condition for which any answer must be peremptory.

As Bergson notes, 'Intuition is a method of feeling one's way intellectually into the inner heart of a thing to locate what is unique and inexpressible in it' (Benke, 2000: 28). By aligning method with feeling, the French philosopher evokes the systemic and its refusal. One needs both for something to work. A condition must be posited as an expressive act that can be overridden, broken down, rendered inexpressible. For if, as Bergson resumes, 'reality' is thought to impact 'directly on our senses and our consensus—if a 'direct communication' can be said to exist 'between the material world and ourselves'—then 'art would be unnecessary'. For Bergson and Kentridge, there can be no collective agreement as to the meaning or value of anything. Bergson's aphorism—'act like a man of thought and think like a man of action' (Malarkey and Pearson, 2014: 457)—is an acute distillation of the Kentridgean paradox. For the artist, thought and action are an affair, embroiled and ceaselessly interactive. Nietzsche's notion of the 'physiological' thought is also fitting in this regard, because what matters is a thought's embodied articulation as an inscrutable feeling (2007: 34).

It is not that one cannot (or should not) posit some rule for understanding what Kentridge makes and does; it is that one should always acknowledge that such an endeavour is perilous. For Kentridge, 'vulnerability and the process of growth' are 'continuous acts of transition.' He opposes the 'sensation ... of discovery' and, with specific reference to charcoal, notes 'the imperfection of erasure.' Elsewhere, he ponders why 'passion can be so fleeting and memory so short-lived.' Emotionally, intellectually, and artistically, Kentridge negates the fixities of place and time which a retrospective may suppose. He challenges each and every attempt to fix his art as something monumental, or worse, as a window onto a country's history. Rather, Kentridge puts categorical imperatives under erasure. This process is both aesthetic and ethical. In the artist's world, the two are inseparable. Together they form 'a polemic for a kind of uncertainty,' he notes in a conversation with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev. 'Neither programme nor chance' can define a given project. After Stéphane Mallarmé (or more recently, Taleb), hazard always comes in the way of system, and the error factored into it (2006: 161–81).

It would therefore be reasonable to question any parenthetical framing of Kentridge's oeuvre. No

guide, no segue from room to room, can account for his output in any resolute fashion. The artist does not memorialise what he does. As he has roundly declared, 'I am only an artist, my job is to make drawings, not to make sense.' If he acknowledges that his work appears 'quaint,' this is not the price one pays for looking backwards. If he repeatedly draws a 1950s Bakelite telephone, it does not mean that he is being nostalgic. As he reminds Christov-Bakargiev, 'The lines of communication are contemporary even though the instruments are old.' And as J.M. Coetzee further notes in his essay on *The History of the Main Complaint* (1999):

It would be a mistake to conclude ... that Kentridge's films are about a past era. A more likely explanation is that he simply finds the look, the style, the heft of those times congenial, perhaps also the mode of power then (centralised, dictatorial) is easier to image. There may even be a component of nostalgia in the backward look, as long as we recognise a certain loathing mixed in with the attachment (and is not the mix of loathing and attachment what defines obsession?) (1999: 87).

Coetzee's qualification is vital to understanding Kentridge's mechanics of erasure, its roots in psychopathy, and its obsessive-compulsive expression. In Kentridge's world, nostalgia begets its comeuppance; the contemporary its conceit. He defines his polemic of uncertainty—through the act of drawing—as 'a model for knowledge' (Christov-Bakargiev, 1999: 8). This model is never absolute. 'What ends in certainty does not begin that way.' Therein lies our decadent late-modern paradox. What

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matters to Kentridge is 'the unwilling suspension of disbelief' (Christov-Bakargiev, 1999: 19). This inversion of a prevailing view points to a non-aligned and highly ambivalent relationship to the finite meaning of an image, thought, or experience. Kentridge's relationship to politics is just as indeterminate—'concerned but distanced.' This is because the artist has always had a strange relationship with the familiar, and a familiar relationship with the strange. This curious vertigo allows for belonging and non-belonging. It gives his art its querulous, suspended, and cryptic quality.

In 'Landscape in a State of Siege' (1988), Kentridge strips Africa of a putative innocence before colonialism. Instead, he affirms the 'strange contradictory relationship between Western conquest and the tribalism that still endures.' Against the 'Edenic'—akin to the 'plague of the picturesque'—Kentridge speaks of a ceaseless dismembering; a layering of history upon history which renders impossible the desire to fix or separate the past from the present:

In the same way that there is a human act of dismembering the past ... there is a natural process in the terrain through erosion, growth, dilapidation that also seeks to blot out events. In South Africa, this process has other dimensions. The very term 'new South Africa' has within it the idea of a painting over the old, the natural process of dismembering, the naturalisation of things new.

In 'The Body Drawn and Quartered' (1999), Kentridge shifts from pentimenti to sonar, X-ray, MRI, and CAT-scan. Here we find the core of his unsettling and highly suggestive vision: 'Dissect as deep as you like and you will never find the mimetic reference of the sonar. They are already a metaphor. They are messages from an inside we may apprehend but can never grasp. In their separation from the apparent they come as reports from a distant and unknown place' (1999: 140). His work does not define itself in relation to an external source. The work in itself is metaphor. What this suggests is that art—as metaphor, devoid of mimetic reference—exists unto itself. As such, it is both ineffable and ontological. And yet, despite this insight, Kentridge's art remains burdened by a retrospective marker that sets it up as a beacon for South Africa's new found sovereignty.

Timing is crucial, even for an artist for whom time is error stricken. Yet what of bad timing? That Kentridge arrives on the Western stage at the precise moment when South Africa is reintegrated into the world—after the unbanning of the ANC and before the country's first democratic election—is fitting and vexing. Then, there existed (and remains) an avid interest in 'contemporary' African art. That said, Kentridge's work has always been irreducible to the continent's idea of itself, or more pointedly, its construction from without. Why is it, then, that Kentridge is more celebrated than any other South African artist? Has his international success not skewed and deflected a domestic capacity to read his value? Here I am well aware that I can be charged with parochialism. By challenging Kentridge's stellar international reputation, however, I am not implying that those who broker and report on art within the nation's borders automatically know better. Rather, I am interested in what it is that the rest—the West—find so deserving of praise.

The answer lies in Kentridge's readability within an international, specifically European, context. Other than Dumile Feni, his aesthetic sensibility is wholly European (Buchner, Goethe, Daumier, Hogarth, Goya, Max Beckmann, and Otto Dix, among others). Not only has he thoroughly digested and translated these influences but, by virtue of his postcolonial location, added to this European store of knowledge, revealing its tentacular global imprint. Kentridge's translation of this impact is never cravenly deferential. In 'Faustus in Africa! Director's Note' (1999), he pointedly states that Faustus is a 'risposte ... to Hegel's high-handed dictum that "after the pyramids, World Spirit leaves Africa, never to return".' In 'Landscape in a State of Siege', he challenges Theodor Adorno's assertion that after Auschwitz, lyric poetry is impossible. In short, Kentridge questions the very heritage he has made his own. In his diagnosis of this heritage, its decadence in particular, he emerges as the bastard son of Empire—its aggravated conscience. Hand in hand with Kentridge's ethical riposte comes artistic innovation. The key is his technique—the redrawing and erasure of a given work which, at each instant of its mutation, is photographed then animated. No drawing is in and of itself complete. Rather, each is assigned a fleeting place in an unfolding narrative that is never storyboarded in a strictly causal sense.

Kentridge's process finds its echo in deconstruction—a method maligned in our predictive and Stalinist era—namely, Jacques Derrida's theory of erasure, or *sous rature*. The method involves the crossing out of a word in a text that allows its cancelled iteration to remain legible. The process begs the question: where does meaning lie? In the projection, in its cancellation, or both? The ambiguous slippage is key. For Kentridge, both must arrive at their exhaustion. They must both be up-ended; in effect, deconstructed. That this process is intellectually and ethically scorned in our absolutist era is deeply concerning.

As Michael Godby notes in his response to *The Head & the Load*, 'lunacy' is central to the work's schizophrenic and convulsive affect (2018). Kentridge is not telling the story of the abuse and exploitation of the Black body in the First World War, but performing its abjection. The vision of a ship dismantled and carried piece by piece by load-bearers is as deranged as it is obscene. Unlike Werner Herzog's comparable vision in the film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982)—in which a ship is hauled across a mountain with the aid of a pulley-system and the use of slave labour—in *The Head & the Load*, bodies bare an oppressive weight. They are singly dehumanised mechanisms in a brutal Imperial venture. 'There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,' Walter Benjamin reminds us (1969: 256). Kentridge's drama is precisely thus—a brutal paradox. The affect is neither discursive nor moral. It is immanent, deranged, deconstructive; wracked by a monstrous ambivalence which it cannot override.

To what end, if any, does Kentridge forge his logic and its expression? If it is not to correct a received lens, but to shatter it, then why? It is, I think, because ambiguity and the anxiety that courses through it cannot be easily resolved. Like so many white male South African artists, Kentridge has an avowedly uneasy relation to the country of his birth and the imperial stain that blots it. While I understand the artist's agitation concerning a sense of place and purpose, I believe that the complacent appraisal thereof has blunted the complexity of its thrust. When Kentridge asks that we keep 'nihilism at bay and optimism in check,' he is posting a grievous concern regarding the danger of these respective drives (1999b: 103). How he mediates them deserves closer examination. It is not mere ambiguity that Kentridge values, but a charged

and self-reflexive ambivalence. When he states that 'irony' is 'the last refuge of the petit-bourgeoisie,' we are alerted to the artist's refusal to sit on the fence and bitch from a position of power or lack thereof. But what, then, is left? What makes Kentridge so compelling?

It is the unsettlement of his position, an unsettlement vitally needed in a society (domestic and global) that is caught between the toll of fatalism and the clarion call of hope. Kentridge's position is a non-position—a negative critique of a lived and unresolved contradiction. If his art is so appealing today, it is not because his work posits a solution to an existing dilemma, but because it exemplifies that dilemma and the hysteria that underpins it. Is his work an attractive sop—in extremis—for a troubled conscience? If so, does this make the work worthy of acclaim? Is this what we want and need—the convulsiveness of affect? A sensibility over-charged? A logic and a passion that is provisional, elliptic, trapped inside a rictus of irresolution? Are these the sources of present-day satisfaction? And is this the end-game that defines the co-optation of South African art, a co-optation that suggests not the distinctiveness of South African art but its post-liberatory inscription into a global malaise? Surely, what South African art emphatically does not need is the funereal glamour of a retrospective? A move of this nature is surely worrisome to an artist such as Kentridge, who is better served by a healthy inquiry into his aesthetic and ethical dilemma and process.

It is not only the international art community that should be held culpable in this regard. The domestic community has preferred craven reverence over an open-minded cultural engagement with his work. That his preoccupations have become global cultural capital says more about the art market's nefarious attempts to transform its limits into a strength. The international success of Kentridge's work is ironic; the work is not. One could ask what artist in their right mind would resist such acclaim? Here Samuel Beckett comes to mind, as does J.M. Coetzee. The former declined the Nobel Prize, the latter—despite accepting it—remains uninspired by craven celebration. I imagine that Kentridge, though temperamentally dissimilar, remains similarly wary. Turn to any interview with the artist and one encounters a disarming modesty and a

pointed ambivalence. His reflections are hallmarks of intellectual and artistic clarity which, in the instant of their articulation, are always searching. The root of the problem lies in how his work has been positioned. Here the prevailing fault lies with critics and curators, but also with a hapless public who, despite knowing better, invariably follow accredited opinion. Or, then again, perhaps it is simply the work's seductive articulation of the inarticulate that compels? And is this not what Nietzsche, regarding Wagner, warns us against? Instability disguised as a principle? Is it appropriate to assign a system and a meaning where there is none? What of Kentridge's belief that it is not the job of the artist to make sense?

The resounding response to Kentridge's production, *Processione di Reparazionisti* (2017) in Turin was expressed in a single word, notes David Freedberg—imparagonible! ('without peer' or 'beyond comparison'). The response is fitting because it defies reason. In the face of the anarchic—the absence of any governing principle—what is left to say? Freedberg, however, maintains a belief in the restorative power of Kentridge's art. 'When he makes forms explode, disintegrate and arrive near dissolution, he shows the possibility—and actuality of reconstitution.' A question however persists: Where does the reconstitution occur? In the work? In the audience's singular minds? In group-think? Surely the cry—imparagonible!—supposes something that cannot be measured, and therefore can never be reconstituted? The will to synthesise when confronted by an aggravated movement is only possible if, after Bergson, one recognises that resolution is always temporary. It can only be understood as such by acknowledging that wholeness—as idea, principle, or belief—is only and

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always open. At no point is it immune to puncture or leakage. Therein lies neurosis; therein the fallout of trauma. The awe Kentridge inspires comes after a fall. As such, it is always belated.

As I understand it, Kentridge offers no reprieve. He provides no final solace. What we have are sluices, sumps, diffusions, interruptions. The method—more free-fall than elevation—is crudely schematic. Kentridge's puppetry—a given work's mechanism—is its entirety; the sum of 'limbs' and 'articulated rods with primitive hinges' that affirm an austere inclination. 'Time and again, Kentridge looks for the basic forms of things,' writes Freedberg. The rudiment is the thing. The husk. Bare-boned. Inessential yet critical. For what exercises Kentridge are worlds voided, without answer and without reprieve. His theatre is a stark expression of that constitutive void, an art reduced to an inchoate (if robust) gasp.

If the people and things that populate his art—little more than mechanicals—appear vital it is because they inhabit their death. Kentridge's art thrives as an afterlife, a ghosting. Things and people who revolve about their own corpses. I say this in full knowledge that others like Freedberg believe his works to be infused with life. For me, however, their nullity is their surest tell. Phantasmagorical, his is a traffic in death and dying, an art that thrives at the limit of expression. Therein lies their greater strength. If we cheer at the close of a performance—I am usually the one who remains seated, dumbfounded, mute—it is because we are the victims of a rapture. Enslaved to frenzy, riven with distress, ours is a somatic response to life's futility, and Kentridge's articulation thereof.

After Guy Debord, we know this unchecked frenzy as the 'society of the spectacle' (Goniwe, 2017: 14). Rallies, toxic and hypnotic, come to mind. As does Edmund Burke's formulation of the sublime as a combine of awe and terror. Once again, we find ourselves returning to Wagner and the Nuremberg rallies his music inspired. Where Kentridge differs—and I'm making a fine point here—is that he knows the monstrousness of his theatrical confections. If he deems them necessary, it is because sobriety is no longer viable, reason futile. Ours is a culture of decadence which, having long ago arrived at its expiry date, nevertheless thrives as a death-in-life, a procession of corpses. What must we do? How can we countermand the mind-

numbing excessiveness of our age? One does so, not by ignoring the horror, but by living inside of it. This, by default, is Kentridge's gift. That Nietzsche failed to pass through the decadence he railed against is unsurprising. No one can. Nietzsche recognised it in Wagner, as have I in Kentridge. The critical difference is that Kentridge does not exult therein. He merely articulates its unrelenting and morbid excrescence—our schizophrenia and lunacy, our hysteria, our neuroses.

No one can dispute that ours remains an acutely nervous condition. In this neo-fascist moment, it might seem like hysteria and hyperbolic excess have returned with a vengeance. The truth is, they never left. We roam the earth, our bodies a set of pruning shears, our heads a megaphone. Its grotesque flowering is certainly the aftermath of the First World War. It is then, long live David Byrne of Talking Heads, that we stopped making sense. Kentridge knows this. He has tolled this truth throughout his life and work. What is conveniently forgotten is that the artist is both more and less than the grotesque inflation he has become. Unlike Wagner, he has never courted reverence. Snarled and unforgiving, his is an art that patently rejects its edification.

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