

Dialectic of Enlightenment

ROSALIND E. KRAUSS ON WILLIAM KENTRIDGE'S NORTON LECTURES

THE DRAFTSMAN SWIPES his stick of charcoal over his paper sheet, then doubles back for the next stroke, the heel of his hand passing over the initial line to smear it into a shadow behind the ridge of itself. The projection of a shadowy space behind the physical furrow of the contour leaves no doubt that drawing is illusion, even as the line sits atop the page as affirmation of its material presence, its reality. The lesson of the smeared line is that the artist cannot sharply distinguish his own material from its projection into a fictive space “underneath” its profile.

The importance of such a doubled understanding of drawing emerged clearly in William Kentridge's recent Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University (videos of which are available on the website of the Mahindra Humanities Center). In the first lecture, titled “In Praise of Shadows,” an excerpt from Kentridge's 1999 film *Shadow Procession* led to an excursus on Plato's Allegory of the Cave. In its argument that the philosopher has a duty to dispel (by force, if necessary) the illusions of the prisoners who mistake the shadows on the walls of the cave for reality, Kentridge located the origin of “the nexus of enlightenment, emancipation, and violence” that would become an underlying theme of all six lectures. Another key argument, also traced to the Allegory of the Cave, emerged in the division between the artist as maker and the artist as viewer. As maker, the artist is absorbed by the double swipes of the line; as viewer, he distinguishes the linear substance

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from its shadow. Projected behind Kentridge as he spoke, a prerecorded video showed shards of black paper that we saw his hands arrange so that a horse became visible and took on various postures. The forms that he assembled came to life through our own agency in seeing and making the “good form” of the gestalt. There was a real generosity in the way Kentridge here revealed his method, opening up the illusion to our inspection, allowing us to get to the truth of the draftsman's material. Kentridge likened the sheet itself to

a “paper membrane”: a screen between us and the world, almost an extension of our retinas.

The lectures overall were titled “Six Drawing Lessons”; along with excerpts from his films, videos of the lectures' conception were marvelously synchronized with their delivery. Several such projections displayed aphoristic phrases taped onto an open notebook. Some examples: A NECESSARY STUPIDITY, FINDING THE DRAWING—TWICE, PLEASURES OF SELF DECEPTION, PARCOURS D'ATELIER, HIGHWAY OF CONSCIOUSNESS, YOU BROUGHT THIS ON YOURSELF. This growing throng of aperçus that occurred to Kentridge as he worked on the series of talks became a collage of thought: another drawing lesson.

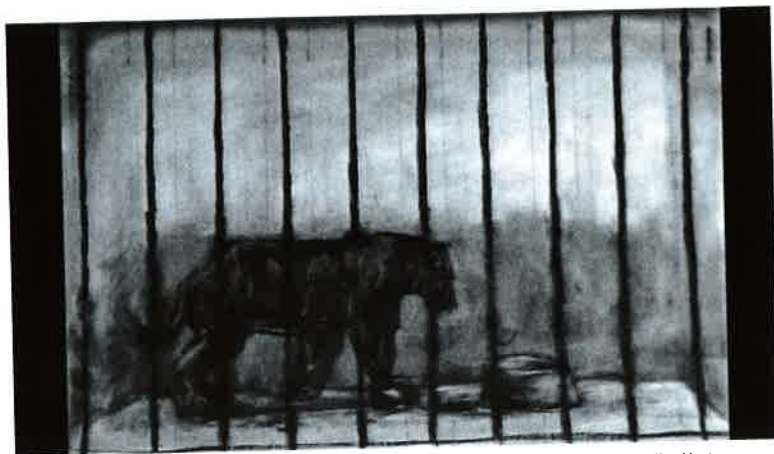
The six lectures were organized into a narrative zoom from Plato to the history of colonialism to the artist's native city, Johannesburg—and continuing on to his immediate environment: the studio, which was also a frequent stopping point along the way. Titled “A Brief History of Colonial Revolts,” the second lecture linked the genocide of the Herero in German Southwest Africa back to Plato's cave, tracing the journey from there to the role of the Enlightenment during colonialism: the forced exposure to the light, no matter how violently imposed. This was followed by a discussion of Kentridge's 2005 production of *The Magic Flute*. Mozart's belief in the project of Enlightenment is, Kentridge noted, no longer possible: not least because “the calamitous history of colonialism” has exposed that “every act of enlightenment . . . is dogged by [its] shadow”—by the violence that went along with it. The set he made for the production was the black box of an old concertina camera, as “the photographic and the projection of the photographic” became “the terrain for exploring the argument.” Passing to his own studio, he showed the way he made drawings using charcoal, ink, and pencil into negatives for projection at the back of this set.



Video stills from projection used in “Six Drawing Lessons,” William Kentridge's Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2012.

The overall arc of the progression toward the studio was continued in “Vertical Thinking: A Johannesburg Biography.” Whereas almost all large cities have “a geographical *raison d'être*,” Kentridge said, the founding of Johannesburg in 1886 was driven by geology, in the form of a thin seam of gold that surfaced there. The underground mines that followed this seam into the ground resulted in giant sinkholes that subverted the very idea of the ground as a foundation. The excavated earth, meanwhile, was massed into flat-topped hills. These were themselves transient, however: Once technology allowed it, these hills were pillaged for their residual gold to the extent of being, as Kentridge put it, “erased.” He also spoke of the scrub on the veldt sometimes catching fire, leaving charcoal that produces an image if paper is rubbed over the ground. The city is thus itself an “animated drawing, erasing and redrawing itself.”

In a video of Kentridge working on a charcoal depiction of Johannesburg, we saw his characteristic technique in action—what he has elsewhere called “stalking



Video still from projection used in "Six Drawing Lessons," William Kentridge's Charles Elliot Norton Lectures, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2012.

the drawing." He walks to and fro between drawing and camera, shooting two frames of film for each addition or erasure, which appears as movement in the finished animation. "Making," he said here, is "contingency allied to some unspecified, unclear understanding." Kentridge invoked Fortuna, goddess of chance, as indispensable to the act of making. Distinct from both the unconscious and the purely aleatory, this figure of Fortuna is (as I once noted in *October*) close to Stanley Cavell's idea of automatism. For Cavell, "automatism" is made possible by a set of rules—like those for the fugue—a theme Kentridge develops in the fourth lesson's focus on rigorously following a series of decisions.

Titled "Practical Epistemology: Life in the Studio," that lecture enumerated the rules of his process: 1) the filmstrip's potential movement both forward and in reverse, 2) "the utopian perfectibility of the world in reverse," 3) the performance of this recognition in the tension of the body as the artist makes the leap of transformation. This, again, is "a process of making and looking." Yet the studio also demands an awareness of "what happens during the learning of the process, in the rehearsal, the undoing, the redoing of those actions—and that is the new set of possibilities that emerge while performing the repeated actions."

Another insight related to Kentridge's "stalking the drawing" in the studio brought him to a discussion of the primitive instruments of cinema, with the whirl of their little windows opening onto the image to blur it into movement: the phenakistoscope, the zoetrope. Their own ancestor, the stereoscope, first made it clear that "we are actively making the seeing"—that we ourselves create the illusion. Here a notebook page with "aphorisms of the studio" was particularly telling: DRAWING WITH ONE EYE SHUT, PERFORMANCES OF TRANSFORMATION, THE ILLUMINATING SHADOW.

As he began the fifth lecture, "In Praise of Mistranslation," Kentridge showed a splendid animated drawing of a panther circling its cage, leaving smears of charcoal against the cage's sides, as though the animal's black

coat had shed into the ashy deposit of shadow. The panther was followed by Dürer's 1515 woodcut of a rhinoceros, which Kentridge used as a paradigm of our ambivalence about nature: "wanting to pull it closer . . . while wanting to proclaim its otherness." Kentridge explained that rhinoceroses are often hunted in South Africa for the supposed aphrodisiac quality of their horns, as well as "farmed

for their exotic otherness" in game reserves. Yet the attraction of the rhinoceros in particular also holds true for Kentridge: "There is something inside us that reaches out toward the otherness of the animal, as if the animal itself can lead us to the unfathomable otherness that resides inside of us."

This metamorphic drive is essential to the artist-as-maker, as well as an unavoidable aspect of the act of viewing. Put another way, transformation is fundamental to the artistic act, the "bread and butter" of the studio. It is what allowed Picasso to image a bicycle seat and handles into *Head of a Bull*, 1943—to pass in one leap from mechanical to animal. But the rules of reversal, as Kentridge pointed out, are also at work: "The bull also retreats into the bicycle: We make the other familiar." In Picasso's *Goat*, 1950, a similar reciprocity is at work: The domestic objects—wicker basket as rib cage, ceramic jars as udders—that make up the creature sprang from the artist's imagination, which can also, however, release its grip on the image, so that one can conceive of the basket and jars flying apart and returning to the piles of debris from which they were plucked in the first place.

The theme of identification with the animal, its anthropomorphic character, brought Kentridge to the source of his own animated panther in Rilke's famous poem. He quoted Richard Exner's translation:

Ceaselessly the bars and rails keep passing
Till his gaze, from weariness, let all things go. For
it seems to him the world consists of bars and
railings and beyond them world exists no more.

Supple, strong, elastic is his pacing
and its circles much too narrow for a leap,
like a dance of strength around a center
Where a mighty will was put to sleep.

Yet from time to time the pupil's curtain
rises silently. An image enters, flies
through the limbs' intensive stillness
until, entering the very heart, it dies.

For *Vorhang der Pupille*, the "pupil's curtain"—the eyelids—Kentridge suggested "shutter" and "film" as translations, evoking, again, the camera. "But this very anthropomorphism," the "human-machine morphism" of the analogy to photographic technique, he continued, "is there to bring us out of ourselves to that part of ourselves that we don't know, to the center we cannot grasp . . . the center where a mighty will is put to sleep." The poem's sense of the "dance of strength" and the experience of waiting and wanting is, for Kentridge, a parallel to the experience of being in the studio.

Much of the sixth and final lecture was devoted to a consideration of time: from the operatic aria, which expands time, to the geologic time of Johannesburg and the temporality of animation; time held in a roll of film or in the whirl of the little windows of a zoetrope. Kentridge was joined onstage by a live brass, string, and percussion band for a fragmentary adaptation of a work in progress titled *The Refusal of Time*, 2012 (the complete version will be on view at Documenta 13 this summer). Here, he performatively discussed the history of attempts to standardize time. Time is also geography, he said, as the European powers mapped time zones across the world for "commerce and control." Under the motto GIVE US BACK OUR SUN, Kentridge spoke of rebellions against colonization as a resistance to the European clock, whose absoluteness was itself undermined by Einstein's discovery of time's relativity. A further phrase pasted into his notebook—ANTI-ENTROPY—informed another section of the lecture. If entropy arises from the inevitable loss of energy as matter cools, losing its power to differentiate itself from its surroundings, it erases the distinction between figure and ground, extinguishing the very possibility of the image. Anti-entropy, conversely, names the will to find the image in its distinction of figure from ground.

All the lectures were brilliantly performed—Kentridge once trained as an actor—and in this instance, the chamber band created an ironically entropic basso continuo both miming and combating the sound of the artist's voice, creating an auditory challenge to the distinction of figure and ground. Looking back on the lectures, Kentridge spoke of their "invitation": "to prevent the different elements from disappearing into a state of disorder or background radiation." By the end, the audience was left with its own task of making and discovering the image projected by the "Six Drawing Lessons"—knowing it to be illusion and reality at once. □

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