William Kentridge: Complexity and intimacy
Redefining political art in the South African late- and post-apartheid context

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‘Rather than saying, like Lenin, ‘What is to be done?’, my engagement is politically concerned, but distanced.’ - William Kentridge

‘I have never tried to make illustrations of apartheid, but the drawings are certainly spawned by and feed off the brutalized society left in its wake. I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain things. An art (and a politics) in which my optimism is kept in check and my nihilism at bay.’ - William Kentridge

The term ‘political art’ has generally been reserved for artwork conveying overt political messages. The most familiar category is probably agitprop or propaganda art, art produced and directed by a certain government or political organization. David Elliot claims in his essay Babel in South Africa that these forms ‘put art in the direct service of politics (…). In such circumstances art easily becomes illustration not example, individual autonomy is willingly sacrificed for what is perceived as the general good.’

But artists who are not linked to any party in particular, have also overtly expressed political opinions in their work. Directed or merely influenced by political organizations, the message conveyed in both categories is a clear and unambiguous political one, be it a commentary, a call for action or a cry for help.

But what are we to do with art whose denotation is not overtly political? And what are we to do when their connotations - those layers of interpretation put on top of a sign’s literal meaning - do carry political elements. Should we call these works political art as
well? Artists creating these kinds of works generally do not consider their work as belonging to the category of political art, but should we accept an artists’ refusal to self-categorization? Duchamp did not consider himself to be a Dadaist either….

Based on the artwork of William Kentridge, this essay will argue for a broader understanding of the concept of political art within the visual arts. Although Kentridge has created some works that directly refer to the political situation of his home country during the late- and post apartheid era, the core of his artwork features a more complex framework for human thought and behaviors on an intimate level, rarely found in the work of his colleagues.

Note that this essay does not include an evaluative standpoint. To argue for a broader understanding of the concept of political art is not to say that art incorporating a complexity of meanings - among them a multitude of political ones - is better than art that expresses an explicit and unambiguous political message. Considering the posters of South African artist group imvaba for political organizations and trade unions such as the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the Food and Allied Workers’ Union (FAWU) (cf. color plates 1-3) and the artwork of Paul Stopforth (cf. color plate 4) and Gavin Younge, to name just a few, it is clear that one cannot denounce the direct approach in art, addressing topical political issues, as completely invalid. Such work has an important place in the spectrum of cultural expression.
Color plates

1. Imvaba artists’ Group
NUMSA Mural [detail], 1989
Painted for NUMSA 1989 National Congress held at Gosforth Park, Johannesburg, May 1989

2. Imvaba artists’ Group
June 16 Mural, 1989
First mural painted for June 16 Rally and later exposed at the COSATU Cultural Weekend in Johannesburg

3. Imvaba artists’ Group
FAWU Mural, 1989
Painted for FAWU Special Nationally Rally held at Dan Qeqe Stadium, Port Elizabeth, July 1989
The triptych is a portrait of the three security policemen who ‘interrogated’ (Stopforth’s quotes) Steve Biko, the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement. Steve Biko died in detention, after days of interrogation and torture.¹⁴
5. Drawing from
*Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris* (1989)^

6. Drawing from
*Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris*^

7. Drawing from *Monument* (1990)


9. Drawing from
*Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old* (1991)

10. Drawing from
*Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old* (1991)
HER ABSENCE FILLED THE WORLD


17. Drawing from *Stereoscope* (1999)
COMPLEXITY

Kentridge’s avoidance of one great story, one belief, one perspective - and thus his tendency towards complexity – has its origins and roots in his childhood and youth. Growing up as a white South African in a family of most distinguished anti-apartheid lawyers, Kentridge soon realized the political abnormality and ambiguity of the situation he was living in. Although politics and art – the latter in the 1970s and 1980s widely considered as a weapon for struggle – conveyed simple, black and white perceptions of the apartheid issue, Kentridge argued from the very start that politics and art needed to incorporate the ambiguity and contradiction inherent in South African reality. This relative perspective, he claims, does not stop the individual from recognizing and condemning evil, but it might stop one from being so utterly convinced of the certainty of one’s own solutions. In his own words: ‘There needs to be a strong understanding of fallibility and how the very act of certainty or authoritativeness can bring disasters.’

This belief has characterized Kentridge’s entire career, from his artistic influences and his expansions into different artistic media to his layering of complexities and ambiguities within different works.

Throughout his work one can identify a variety of artistic influences, both from the African as well as the European continent. On the African side, iconic South-African artist, Dumile Feni was Kentridge’s greatest influence. The two artists met at the Johannesburg Art Foundation, a private art school founded by Bill Ainslie.

‘Dumile made remarkably strong, demonic drawings, either in ballpoint on a small scale, or in charcoal on a large scale. That was the first time that I understood the power of figurative, large-scale charcoal drawings – that they could be so striking.... He had the
capacity to express things on a scale that I thought drawings could not achieve. He is the key local artist who influenced me.”

Kentridge’s relationship with the European and American art legacy was an ambiguous one. The conceptual and minimal European and American art of the 1960s and 1970s and especially the paintings of the New York School with which Kentridge was familiar, struck him as completely apolitical and self-indulgent. Also the abstract expressionism of that era appeared to be stuck in abstractionist silence. Kentridge thus went back into art history and found inspiration in the early 20th century German expressionist work of Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Käthe Kollwitz, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Georg Grosz, the early 20th century French art and the Soviet filmmakers and designers of propaganda posters. Never residing in one artistic influence, Kentridge not only translated modern art and culture to South Africa, but also encapsulated his feelings concerning his troubled homeland under apartheid and his decidedly mixed feelings about political art.

Indecisive about the choice between film, theatre and drawing, Kentridge worked in all areas. It took quite some time for him to realize that this was the only way he could possibly work and he considers the cross-fertilization of the media an important part of the success he has had internationally since the late 1990s.

Of course, Kentridge’s urge towards complexity and ambiguity is not only apparent in his indecisiveness of medium choice or his resistance in relying upon one genre of influences, it also deeply characterizes the content of his works. Kentridge’s complex network of meanings is displayed to the fullest in his animated drawing series, created between 1989 and 1998: Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris (1989), Monument (1990), Mine (1991), Sobriety, Obesity and Growing Old (1991), Felix in
Exile (1994), History of the Main Complaint (1996), Weighing and Wanting (1997-1998) and Stereoscope (1999) (cf. color plates 5-17). The relation between the films and political art is lucidly explained in a 1999 video recording of Kentridge working on Stereoscope:

‘There is a kind of polemic in the films, which is a kind of formal polemic. It has to do with saying it should be possible to make a political art, an art that captures within the kind of ironies, ambiguities and contradictions that are in the political world. [One of the thoughts of this age is that] political art is of clarity of purpose of thought and program. I think, that clarity of program and thought and purpose is often absent in the real world and that behind the clarity of the rhetoric is often a very confusion of goals, aims and agenda’s and the films have been saying or try to say in a way; this open endedness which is part of the films does also reflect the kind of open endedness outside of it.’

Over the course of the seven films, based on the animation of charcoal drawings, Kentridge tells the story of Soho Eckstein, Mrs. Eckstein and Felix Teitlebaum. The early films focus on Soho’s expansion of his mining empire on the outskirts of Johannesburg and his struggle with Felix Teitlebaum over his wife. In Sobriety, Obesity & Growing Old, the loss of his wife induces feelings of personal as well as social guilt. With the fifth episode focusing on Felix entirely, the latter three turn back towards Soho and his struggle for forgiveness. Finally, in Stereoscope, Soho’s industrial success is undone by violent uprisings in the street, but he has regained the love of his wife. This brief synopsis of the films merely describes the framework, upon which Kentridge creates layer upon layer of (political) meaning. In addition, the framework in itself allows for a number of connotations referencing the political situation.

Telling the story starting from the trivial daily life of the three characters works not only as an attractive feature for the audience, but immediately allows a symbolic
interpretation when considering the protagonists as ‘pars pro toto’; their tunnel vision is indicative of the tunnel vision of a South Africa under international siege at the end of the 1980s. Or, as curator and art critic Dan Cameron formulates it:

‘By the time this film [Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris (1989)] was made, worldwide pressure on South Africa to abolish the apartheid system had reached perhaps its greatest intensity, with any number of cultural and economic boycotts in place to isolate the nation as much as possible until it did so. By creating a film in which the main characters are caught up in seemingly pointless brooding about their personal affairs, Kentridge makes an important point about the peculiar form of tunnel vision characteristic of societies under siege. For the three protagonists to be so absorbed in their private lives at a time of evident crisis suggests that their collective refusal to take the prospect of social upheaval seriously is what makes their self-absorption tragic (and the crisis worse).’ 31

A second political connotation inherent in the synopsis of the film series can be found in the fact that the last three films explicitly tackle issues of memory and guilt. This storyline cannot be interpreted without regarding the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, set up in the National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995. The Commission was established to provide a public forum for the victims of state racism to confront their perpetrators and to have the brutality of apartheid publicly exposed and admitted. The goal was to provide ‘as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross human rights violations committed between March 1 1960 and December 5 1993.’ 32 Without explicitly referencing the activities of the committee, it is clear that the storyline of Kentridge’s film cycle has been consistently – be it consciously or subconsciously – influenced by its existence.

While every film, as a separate entity, allows for a number of connotations, one can distinguish the most significant layers of (political) meaning in the themes recurring
over the course of the seven films, the principal ones being the landscape and the body. Throughout the films, the bereft, plundered and ravaged landscape does more than just provide the characters with a setting to act in and upon. Indeed, the relationship of the characters to the landscape is a key element in the film series. Whereas the miners are depicted in close relationship to the landscape, Soho is spending most of his time in self-absorption in his office, ignoring the plight of his wife, his employees and what they stand for. His alienation from nature corresponds with the divorce of the landscape from reality: the South African landscape has known centuries of slavery, colonization and apartheid, but ‘the traces left by [these forms of] past oppression form a barely perceptible part of the current landscape, into which all future efforts at a meaningful reconciliation will also be absorbed.’

The depiction of the landscape and its relation to the characters in this way facilitates a political connotation for those who are willing to seek it.

With regard to the body, Kentridge focuses on the multiplicity of personalities within the individual. Whereas the film series start off with three main characters, the viewer gradually realizes that there are just two; Soho and Felix depict two sides of the same coin, that coin referring at certain points rather explicitly towards William Kentridge (cf. infra). Starting from History of the Main Complaint, and more clearly in both Weighing... and Wanting and Stereoscope, the main question asked is how to maintain a sense of both contradictory and complementary parallel parts of oneself. What is the cost and pain engendered by self-multiplicity? The films mark a feeling of doubt about the positive value of dispersed, multiple identities. With this theme, Kentridge again refers to the political realm of the post apartheid era: ‘It’s a particularly South African phenomenon of
the late 1980s and 1990s to have contradictory thoughts running in tandem. These contradictions work at an internal level in terms of the different views one has of oneself from one moment to the next.\textsuperscript{34}

The paragraphs above illuminated the way in which both form and content of Kentridge’s film series allow for a number of references to the political realm the work was created in. The viewer is confronted with the choice to regard or disregard these political understandings, but their presence within the artwork characterizes a more subtle type of political art.

INTIMACY
Discussing the theme of complexity, the previous paragraphs revealed a possible extension of the understanding of the category of political art. However, it is not Kentridge’s allowance for a complex moral framework for human thought and behaviors that distinguishes his art from that of his colleagues. Indeed, in 1989, after two decades of understanding art as an instrument of propaganda, writers such as Njabulo Ndebele and Chris van Wyk, painters such as Dumile and theatre actors and directors such as John Kani and Ari Sitas, who had advocated the ‘liberation of the arts’ for over a decade received the political voice they needed, when Albie Sachs presented his paper, \textit{Preparing ourselves for Freedom}, during an African National Congress (ANC) in-house seminar. In an environment that had always favored a Leninist view on art, Sachs proposed: ‘our members should be banned from saying that culture is a weapon of struggle. I would suggest a period of, say, five years’\textsuperscript{35}. He explains: ‘… the power of art
lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and reveal hidden tensions – hence
the danger of viewing it as if it were just another kind of missile-firing apparatus.\textsuperscript{36}
During the 1990s more South-African artists indeed understood the need to convey political complexity. But, what distinguishes Kentridge from others is rather the way in which he approaches and obtains this complexity. The individual is taken as the starting point, around which Kentridge weaves the complexity of South African life during apartheid and post-apartheid into the narrative. In addition, this individual refers more than once to Kentridge himself, introducing an autobiographical element in his artwork.

The intimate level is to one extend the result of Kentridge’s approach to drawing. For Kentridge, drawing is a testing of ideas and a way of making a representation of the construction of thought. He claims his starting point is always the desire to draw; ‘the pleasure of putting charcoal marks on paper.’\textsuperscript{37} He does not start from a certain theme or idea, but once in the process of drawing, the work can become a self-centered reflection of whatever is around that interests him. Indeed, drawing for Kentridge means also the physical activity of making the work that both clarifies its idea, but also in the end, constitutes who the artist is.\textsuperscript{38}

‘The activity of drawing is a way of trying to understand who we are or how we operate in the world. It is in the strangeness of the activity itself that can be detected judgment, ethics and morality.’\textsuperscript{39}

The intimacy in Kentridge’s work is not limited to his drawing method; it is essentially apparent in the content of his work. Indeed, many of Kentridge’s choices of subject matter can be accounted for by the artist’s own palpable feeling of ambivalence towards
the privileges and comforts of the class in which he was born. The Soho/Eckstein drawn animation film series is probably the most exquisite example of this.

‘If one correctly recognizes Soho and Felix as alter egos, they may also be considered surrogates for the artist himself. Throughout his work Kentridge has repeatedly imbued each character with fragments of himself – references to his family, his body, and his memory (…).’

The physical features for both characters were drawn from the artist himself. Frequently using the mirror as a tool while drawing, the characters have the same posture and at times the same facial expressions as William Kentridge. While Felix was depicted from the very start as based on Kentridge, Soho takes a little bit more time to incorporate Felix’s features and thus to become identifiable with the creator himself. Kentridge has never denied the presence of autobiographical elements in the film series:

‘I needed Felix to be a second consistent character throughout the film. So who could he be? The easiest thing was to work in a mirror. So it was by chance that he looked like me. But once he started to look like me, I understood that I had to take responsibility for his actions as well. So this became an element, not necessarily of autobiography, but of working within the realm of who Felix was. The film functions more like a diary than an autobiography.’

Felix’s similarities with Kentridge go beyond the physical: the character is created as an artist, in particular, a draughtsman. For example, in Johannesburg, 2nd Greatest City after Paris, Felix dreams of Soho’s wife. He does so using a notebook of drawings that he holds, and that evolve through correction and erasure in the same way as Kentridge’s drawings for projection. The same idea resurfaces in Felix in Exile, when Felix sits in an enclosed room examining and reconsidering his drawings.
It is through these connections with the character that Kentridge is able to incorporate his own relationship with Johannesburg and his experiences of living during the late- and post-apartheid era in South Africa.

In discussing the sources of *Felix in Exile*, the artist explains:

‘One photo came from the massacre outside Sharpeville. At the time, I was six years old and my father was one of the lawyers for the families of the people who had been killed. I remember coming once into his study and seeing on his desk a large, flat, yellow Kodak box, and lifting the lid off of it – it looked like a chocolate box. Inside were images of a woman with her back blown off, someone with only half her head visible. The impact of seeing these images for the first time – when I was six years old – the shock was extraordinary…. So I would say that although when I was drawing the bodies for *Felix in Exile* I did not have the Sharpeville massacre in mind – this was only a connection I made some months or years later – I’m sure that, in a sense, it was trying to tame that horror of seeing those images.’ 44

CONCLUSION

The case study of William Kentridge’s film series has shown that one can broaden the category of political art. Indeed, through his technique resembling the écriture automatique, a complex layering of personal, aesthetic and ultimately political memory informs his animated drawings. Kentridge is just one – albeit an important one - of a variety of artists creating such artwork within the visual and/or the performing arts. To not consider this form of art - whose denotation might not be political at all, but that is nevertheless drenched in the political climate it is made and reflects upon – a part of the category of political art, would be a mistake.
Notes

3 The term agitprop is short for отдел агитации и пропаганды (otdel agitatsii i propagandy), i.e., Department for Agitation and Propaganda, which was part of the Central and regional committees of the HCommunist Party of the Soviet UnionH. Most people today however, see agitprop as a contraction of agitational propaganda. - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agitprop
4 Wikipedia describes the notion of propaganda as a specific type of HmessageH presentation aimed at serving an agenda. At its root, the denotation of propaganda is ‘to propagate (actively spread) a philosophy or point of view’. The most common use of the term (historically) is in HpoliticalH contexts; in particular to refer to certain efforts sponsored by governments or political groups. - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propaganda
6 In semiotics, the word ‘denotation’ is used to indicate the specific/particular image/idea/concept that a sign refers to.
7 In semiotics, the word ‘connotation’ is used to indicate the cultural assumptions that the image implies or suggests. It involves emotional overtones, subjective interpretation, socio-cultural values, and ideological assumptions.
8 Examples are: *Art in a State of Grace, Art in a state of Hope, art in a state of siege* (1988), *Casspies full of love* (1989) and *Ubu tells the Truth (1997) / Ubu and the Truth commission*
10 Paul Stopforth and Gavin Young are generally recognized as being among the first protest artists in South Africa, their use of this form dating from the late 1960s.