

"The concept dog signifies a rule according to which my imagination can delineate the figure of a four-footed animal in a general manner, without limitation to any single determinate figure such as experience, or any possible image that I can represent in concreto, actually presents. This schematism of our understanding, in its application to appearances and their mere form, is an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze."¹

"The products of the imagination are of an entirely different nature; no one can explain or give an intelligible concept of them; each is a kind of monogram, a mere set of particular qualities, determined by no assignable rule, and forming rather a blurred sketch drawn from diverse experiences than a determinate image—a representation such as painters and physiognomists profess to carry in their heads, and which they treat as being an incommunicable shadowy image [Schattenbild] of their creations or even of their critical judgments."¹

IMMANUEL KANT, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787

There is an aspect of contemporary art that must sometimes seem an imposition, even an impertinence to thinking people. It is the crude claim, elevated to structural requirement, that its productions should have a higher meaning—a meaning that must, however, never be explicated. That it must exist and must be celebrated is a given, despite the fact that it is merely a social construct, that does not require a reason, though it appears as obligatory.

The German language has a distinctive word for such implicit and inexplicable meaning – that of "*Sinn*". For "*sense*" here is the empty, irredeemable meaning that, instead of being understood and explained, must only be acknowledged. The presence of meaning is merely asserted, affirmed through social consensus. It emerges from the compulsory generalized convention which insists that art is unconditionally important.

This unfulfilled and unfulfillable assertion—that there must be meaning—is powerful, because it opens up an infinite continuum of reflection. Its reasoning is arbitrary and can therefore be continued at will. The empty ambition for greater significance persistently refuses to be elucidated and thus becomes all the more inexhaustible. In the rhetoric of meaning supposed depth and its groundlessness are literally connected.

William Kentridge's complex work takes on this paradox in a very simple way: he considers, discusses and elaborates on what he does. He even exhibits the way in which ideas *heuristically* come about, as the Ancient Greek term for the discontinuous emergence of new insights indicates, and hints at how the inspiration may be elicited. He grants participation in the very creation of the idea and bases his form on this. In this way, the opus emerges as a continued process unfolding in time. It avoids resulting in a solidified material product, a commodity that could be traded in the marketplace. When he uses a filmic stop-motion animation technique to draw a bird in flight, fixing a phase state and erasing it again, drawing it anew and then erasing it again and again, its overlapping wing beats leave behind a shadowy, fleeting trail, traces both of its flight and of the work's temporality. William Kentridge's practice is distinguished by the fact that he often goes so far as to make the work disappear, wipe it away, erase it, paint over it or tear it up in the course of its creation. Thus the fruit of his actions lies less in the existence of a presentable, tangible product than in the contemplation of continued play.

In his *decameron* of self-reflection from the days of forced isolation, which the pandemic imposed on everyone, William Kentridge retreated into his Johannesburg studio as if it were his own skull, a kind of resonance chamber of his thinking populated by all sorts of found objects. This *studiolo* as the interior of his head, as he imagines the atelier to be, is populated by his own internal contradictions, circling the day's thoughts that split him into his *Doppelgänger*, entangled in theoretical disputes, and the spectres of the night, when the sleep of reason gives birth to monsters, the mice stir from crumpled paper, knock over inkwells, begin to smear and paint by themselves, and, as in a *theatrum machinarium*, Kentridge's favourite objects, the old film camera on its wooden tripod and the sousaphone in the Biedermeier armchair moving on casters, begin to dance with each other.

Only gradually did the state's health regime allow him to reunite with his collaborators, dancers and musicians, into this zone of invention to collectively carry out, during this grand inward turn, what artists usually tend to conceal in the name of cultural competition: the *heuristic* moment, when the idea comes into existence. The authors of "*higher meaning*" have become accustomed to defensively hiding the inventive techniques of their profession and with it the sources of their intuition. They meticulously avoid it since the pretense of higher meaning stems from a desire for a brilliant idea *ex nihilo*, as if the accidental aspect of freely associating and forming analogies would embarrass them in the face of the

sublimity of the end result, as the only thing that matters. Here, however, you can watch the idea at work.

Instead of masking this process, Kentridge makes himself observable and observes himself in the intimacy of ideation, the whole messy tale of creation that is usually covered over by the resulting reification, the work. This is what is different in Kentridge's approach and it makes him stand out as an almost anachronistic *unicum* in this moment of contemporary art. He lays bare the roots, nutrients and ingredients of his flashes of wit, as well as the thoughts that accompany the execution of his creations.

In Kentridge's *modus operandi*, this process is not merely made visible, but becomes the work itself, regardless of whether it leads to a tangible result or remains ephemeral.

His cycle of nine films made during the global health emergency, succinctly entitled "*Self-Portrait as a Coffee Pot*", constitutes a fantastically delirious plague journal. In view of the *gravis* of this *magnum opus* and even more so in light of its author's peculiar universality in respect of the variety of techniques, media and artistic genres he employs, the time has come for truth in the face of the trite talk of art. And beauty cannot be achieved without truth.

The generosity with which Kentridge demonstrates and makes transparent the process of creation itself, from its craftsmanship to its intellectual side, has always been part of his practice. The film medium he used almost from the start corresponds to this attitude to production aesthetics; but also in his famous performance-like lecture series, the Norton Lectures at Harvard and the speeches he recently gave as this year's holder of the Slade Professorship of Fine Art in Oxford, first held by John Ruskin, Kentridge demonstrates the conditions under which his art is created.

In the four and a half hour film cycle "*Self-Portrait as a Coffee-Pot*" this becomes thematic for the first time and gives to the work its main reason. He worked on it for four years. It is an encyclopedic introspection in which, however, the world and its history play the main role as the cause of the formation of the individual. Kentridge justifies this emergence of self-reflection as the subject of a work by stating that the initial restrictive mass quarantine called *lockdown* in March 2020 and the anticipation of the course of the pandemic unexpectedly presented him, for the first time in more than three decades, with the prospect of uninterrupted time in the studio – a temporal freedom that corresponded to the spatial confinement of the studio's circumscribed shell.

He describes this space, which he imagines as an *aedificium*, an enclosure of the ability to think, as "*encoded*". This is probably why his lectures in Oxford, which were conceived in the same context, are entitled "*A Natural History of the Studio*".

All of this, an *œuvre* that is in sum processual, that provides analytical information about itself and is dedicated to objects that are themselves temporal in nature, first and foremost those of political history, categorically differentiates this artist from his contemporaries. He uses his own idiosyncratic means to pursue his own ends.

At the same time, however, in a marked twist, Kentridge's art fulfills in the strictest sense the key concept of art that 18th century philosophy devised in *German Idealism*. At the time, intellectual history was struggling to maintain the unity of human consciousness in its theorisation. This was because it initially seemed to exist as a separate entity – with sensuality on the one hand, and – unconnected and separate from it – reason on the other. It was Immanuel Kant who established a significant category for the thinking of his epoch, which, as a bridge, as a mediating step, was intended to reconcile the discontinuous moments of the empirical and the conceptual.

In his "*Critique of Pure Reason*", Kant used a term that got largely lost in everyday German language and that also fell into disuse in the humanities, a grave word – that of "*Einbildungskraft*", literally the *power of imagination*. As a nominalization, this expression uses the reflexive verb "*einbilden*", which is derived from "*image*", in German "*Bild*". Although it comes from the Greek *φαντασία* and the Latin *imaginatio*, as a *terminus technicus*, establishing the synopsis of Kant's concept, it deviates so explicitly from both that the definition cannot be considered readily translatable.

Kant distinguishes between two forms of this concept, the *reproductive* and the *productive* imagination or *Einbildungskraft*. The former consists in the ability to bring an object to mind that is not physically present and also the ability to memorize this idea. It is not necessary to be able to see, smell or touch a nameless *here and now* in order to recall the general nature of a tree. A process that Kant repeatedly states with astonishment, because it is not a concept, not a theory of the tree that arises, but something shadowy and primordial, which, however, already transcends the singularity of sensory impressions.

The second level of this faculty, that of *productive* imagination, grasps the diversity of sensory impressions as an image and to bring them to representation, as well as

to link and organize the multiplicity gained from perception. By being able to relate images to one another in a new way, it arrives at *syntheses*, as Kant calls them, which is the prerequisite to process the material of sensuality towards understanding and lift it to reason. Kant characterizes this quality of the productive imagination as *creative, spontaneous, active and free*.

Unlike reason in itself, the imagination concretizes its concepts. Unlike sensuality in itself, it apprehends its accidental contents and combines them into coherence. In contrast to both reason and sensuality, the imagination is spontaneous and free, because the latter is bound to sensory stimuli, the former to the necessity of deduction and judgement.

Unlike fantasy, the appearances of the imagination are not arbitrary illusions; unlike imagination, their object is not fictitious. Unlike both, it gives the data of sensory perception access to the general, which is a requirement for their transfer into the content of thought. This in turn makes the imagination a *source of knowledge*. It determines the confused contents of sensuality.

The fact that one can imagine a tree with closed eyes that has nothing particular about it and yet encompasses all the properties of empirical trees is the real merit of imagination in this sense of *Einbildungskraft*, which therefore bears traits of reason, just as it maintains contact with sensuality. It nebulously floats between the two.

Even before he introduces the power of language, Kant calls these generalized apparitions evoked by the imagination *schemata* or *monograms*. And he repeatedly ascribes to them, in an atypical way of speaking compared to his usual apodictic articulation, a nature that remains to some extent cryptic. Goethe also suggested this with a thoroughly concerned undertone in a dictum that Mike Kelley once quoted, albeit affirmatively:

*"Imagination lies in wait as the most powerful enemy. Naturally raw, and enamoured of absurdity, it breaks out against all civilizing restraints like a savage who takes delight in grimacing images."*²

The *monogrammatic* images of the imagination stand between pure thinking and pure feeling; they are not concepts, "*Begriffe*", but they already participate in the achievement of abstracting what is perceived by the senses into a generalization, i.e. understanding or apprehending it. Only by holding an image in the inner imagination that which is sensuously registered becomes available as something thought.

When Kentridge, with sweeping gestural ink strokes or swipes of the ball of his hand over the application of charcoal on large composite sheets of paper spread on the wall, creates a tangle of chaotic blots and lines in order to confront his audience with sudden recognition, when in the movement of the shades, in which the progress of the sketching and scribbling is recorded, a deindustrialised wasteland full of details is suddenly revealed through a changing natural landscape, or a naked tree suddenly sprouts leaves and ends up in bloom, then it is as if one could watch the power of imagination in *statu nascendi*. Kentridge's method allows us to see the imagined in its transition, as it is brought to view by sheer power of imagination, *Einbildungskraft*. He makes the imagination appear as an activity itself, the moment when the imagined becomes an image, the schematic coagulates into a *schema*, and the physical involvement of the artist leaves no doubt that it is really a *force*, or "*Kraft*", that brings this about.

Kant thought of this tremendous transition in precisely this way: that the power of imagination is able to *give the concept an image*, just as it gives the image its concept.³

Because the capacity of *Einbildungskraft*, in its freedom, confronts the intellect following its stringent principles of logic, the contact of both can cause them to "*mutually animate*" each other.⁴ And this is exactly the reason why the concept of imagination as a sphere of creativity provided a key to theoretical insight into the aesthetic within the *critical philosophy* of the late 18th century. With the judgment of taste as its *métier*, it is the imagination alone that stands in relation to beauty, and in this it is superior to the mode of the intellect.

Kentridge stands at a tangent to the conceptual core of aesthetics wherever he succeeds in making the effects of the imagination apparent and thus proves its power. When the mirror figure of himself, who is at odds with the other Kentridge, asks rhetorically whether – despite all the dissent – one can at least agree that there is neither a rhinoceros in the studio nor a hurricane raging, the *Doppelgänger* opposite tears up the sheets bearing the scribbles of the eponymous espresso pot, incessantly and casually sketched with ink, only for a suddenly rising wind to stir up the scraps and reassemble them into the portrait of that very rhinoceros, which in the end will indeed trot through the studio.

One would suspect this performance of a dialogue with oneself of the utmost subjectivism, were it not for its Chaplinesque style of a continuous dialectic of contradiction, which always corresponds to contradictions in reality.

They challenge the viewer to consider these as antinomies linked to history, to art history and to the immediate present, which ultimately means himself. The same viewer might also recognize his own irrational *apotropaic* actions (deflecting harm) at the beginning of the epidemic in the protagonist's activity, for example when he indulges in obsessive statistical calculations that attempt to cope with the spread of the epidemic by computing infection rates from mortality figures in order to understand the incomprehensible and to banish impending evil.

Thus one witnesses in awe how in a long play of thoughts—a “*längeres Gedankenspiel*” by a *homo ludens* and possibly the most complete artist of his generation—unfolds before one's eyes in powerful pictures, “*bildmächtig*” would be the German term, equally transforming a subjectivity into an objectivity, an individual into a valid generality, and conversely demonstrating, how an objective becomes subjective or all of a sudden an abstract insight appears sensually by means of a picture.

This is the truth to which productive imagination can rise in the field of beauty.

WOLFGANG SCHEPPE Venice, 21 February 2024

(translated with Max Norman)

1 IMMANUEL KANT: *The Critique of Pure Reason* [1787], Norman Kemp Smith [trans], London, MacMillan & Co, 1929, pp. 182, 487.

2 JOHANN WOLFGANG GOETHE: *Tag- und Jahreshefte*, 1805, in: Goethe's poetische u. prosaische Werke in Zwei Bänden, Bd. 2, Cotta'sche Buchhandlg., Stuttgart/Tübingen 1837, p. 581. Mike Kelley used this abridged translation of the passage: “*Imagination lies in wait as the most powerful enemy. Naturally raw, and enamoured of absurdity, it breaks out against all civilizing restraints like a savage who takes delight in grimacing idols*” in: MIKE KELLEY: *Pay For Your Pleasure*, Renaissance Society of Chicago, Chicago 1988.

3 IMMANUEL KANT: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [1781], in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. IV, Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften [Hrsg.], Berlin 1911, p. 100.

4 IMMANUEL KANT: *Kritik der Urteilkraft*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. V, Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften [Hrsg.], Berlin 1913, p. 287.

This leaflet accompanies the exhibition

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE
SELF-PORTRAIT AS A COFFEE-POT

curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

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